

Study of the TANF Application Process

Final Report: Volume 1

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Prepared for

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Executive Summary

The passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in 1996 dramatically transformed the nation's primary cash assistance program for low-income families when it created the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Program to replace the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) Program. There is a substantial body of research on some of the major policy changes under TANF, including, for example, increased work requirements, and time limits on program eligibility. Much less is known, however, about changes in TANF application policies and procedures and their potential effects on the decision to participate and on application experiences and outcomes. The major goal of the Study of the TANF Application Process is to help fill that gap in knowledge.

The Study has two major parts: the Survey of States and the Case Studies. The Survey of States, included in Section One of this Final Report, includes findings of a number of State-level and local-office data collection efforts and analyses focused on TANF application policies and procedures and on the content, quality, and format of TANF application data. Specifically, the study included a survey of 54 States and territories ("54-State survey") focusing principally on which TANF application data are collected and maintained, a survey of 18 selected states ("18-State survey") focusing principally on TANF application policies, and a survey of 11 local TANF offices¹ ("11-office survey") focusing principally on application procedures.

The Case Studies, included in Section Two of this Final Report, focus on TANF application policies and procedures, as well as on the application experiences and outcomes for a sample of families seeking assistance, in six selected county or local welfare offices: Mercer County (Trenton), NJ; Ramsey County (St. Paul), MN; San Diego County (San Diego), CA; Providence, RI; Cook County (Chicago), IL; and Bibb County (Macon), GA.

Research Objectives and Major Findings

The two parts of this study were designed to address a set of major research questions organized around the goal of learning more about the TANF application process, and how it may affect applicant experiences and outcomes. Exhibit ES-1 presents the major research questions and the parts of the study that address each question. The exhibit is followed by a summary of the major findings for each research objective.

¹ Although 12 offices were initially selected for the study, only 11 could complete the survey in time for this report.

Exhibit ES-1**Relationship of Research Questions to Study Part**

What are official State-level application policies and procedures for TANF cash assistance, how have they changed the nature of the application process since the end of the AFDC Program, and how do they differ from State to State?	Survey of States
How does the TANF intake and application process operate in selected local TANF Program offices and how has it changed since the end of the AFDC Program?	Survey of States, Case Studies
What is the evidence concerning the possible contribution of changes in the application process to changes in individuals' decisions to apply?	Survey of States; Case Studies
What are the content, quality, and format of data that States collect and maintain on applications, approvals, denials, and diverted applicants?	Survey of States
What are the implications of State-by-State differences in the definition and measurement of "application," "approval," "denial," and "diversion" for the interpretation and comparability of data documenting those events?	Survey of States
How have the numbers of applications filed and approved changed since the implementation of the TANF Program? How comparable are trends in applications and approvals over time and across States?	Survey of States
What are the TANF application decisions, experiences, and results in selected TANF offices?	Case Studies
What is the potential for individuals to be either formally diverted or informally deterred from filing TANF applications in selected local offices?	Case Studies

What are the official State-level application policies and procedures for TANF cash assistance and how have they changed the nature of the application process since the end of the AFDC Program?

Findings from the Survey of States:

The implementation of national welfare reform has added to the content and structure of applications for cash assistance in most States, while maintaining most of the core informational requirements of the AFDC application process. Many States in the 18-State survey had already made changes to the application process before the implementation of TANF in the context of State-initiated welfare reform efforts.

The major changes in TANF applicant behavioral and informational requirements reflect overall policy emphases on developing economic independence and encouraging personal and parental responsibility. For example, many States introduced an employability assessment or job search requirement for applicants. Many States also introduced requirements to document child immunizations and satisfactory school attendance for children.

How does the TANF intake and application process operate in selected local TANF Program offices and how has it changed since the end of the AFDC Program?

Findings from the Survey of States:

Local offices have changed or introduced a number of application processes or activities as a result of welfare reform, including, for example: pre-application screening interviews, employability assessments, and meetings with other staff and other agencies, such as employment security agencies and child support enforcement agencies. Most local offices in the 11-office survey have also increased the amount and types of information exchanged between applicants and agencies.

Findings from the Case Studies:

The study sites were chosen purposively on the basis of their policy choices regarding diversionary assistance and applicant job search. Diversionary assistance is a lump sum payment in lieu of ongoing cash assistance. Three of the study sites (Ramsey Co., Mercer Co., and San Diego Co.), offered diversionary assistance and two sites (Cook Co., and Bibb Co.) included a required job search for most applicants.² With the exception of the sites that have implemented applicant job search, the major requirement for the TANF application process is the same as for AFDC: providing appropriate information to determine eligibility and benefit levels, as well as documentary proof of that information.

The sites varied somewhat on the number of visits to the welfare office applicants have to make to complete the process, although in all sites a minimum of two visits is usually required. Moreover, some sites have introduced additional measures to minimize the potential for fraud, such as a requirement for finger-imaging (e.g., San Diego Co.), and investigations of potential fraud for some or all applicants (e.g., Providence and San Diego Co.).

The applicant job search requirements and diversionary benefits in some of the study sites have been implemented since welfare reform (in some instances prior to PRWORA). In most of the other study sites without those features, however, the TANF application process has changed little since AFDC, although policies for certified clients have changed.

What is the evidence concerning the impact of changes in the application process on application decisions?

Findings from the Survey of States:

The key changes to the application process noted across offices were an increase in the amount of information staff provide to individuals, and an increased availability of support services during the application period. With some exceptions, most staff from the 11 local welfare offices included in the Survey of States did not feel that changes made in the application process had significantly affected the willingness of individuals to apply for cash assistance or to complete the application process. General program requirements and increased employment opportunities outside of TANF were cited as more likely to influence application decisions.

² Mercer County's diversionary assistance program (EEI) is a lump sum payment intended to support a job search, but there is no broadly-applied applicant job search requirement.

Findings from the Case Studies:

The Case Studies relied on three sources of information about ways in which the TANF application process may affect decisions to apply, or to complete an application for, TANF benefits: (1) the informed opinion of caseworkers; (2) applicant reports about their motivation and expectations in the application decision and process; and (3) applicant behavior as reflected in the case record. In three of the study sites, including the two with applicant job search requirements, workers believed that some of the application policies and procedures introduced under welfare reform might be deterring some individuals from applying or from completing an application.

Other evidence for potential informal diversion comes from individuals' behavior and opinions. For example, in five of the sites from one-quarter to one-third of the research sample decided either not to apply for TANF or not to complete the TANF application process; in the site with the most stringent applicant job search that combined proportion was over 60 percent. Moreover, important proportions of uncertified individuals³ reported either that they did not understand some aspects of the process or did not get the help they needed to complete the process.

The evidence adduced above for informal diversion does not by itself indicate that diversion was inappropriate or harmful. To uncover the potential for inappropriate diversion, the study compared the post-application incomes and employment rates of nonapplicants and applicant non-completers with those of certified families. The potential for inappropriate diversion arises when otherwise needy families appear to be deterred from applying for, or completing applications for, TANF benefits. In fact, the study found that only 2 of 12 sample groups of nonapplicants or applicant non-completers were faring worse than certified families at the time of a follow-up interview at 3 to 9 months after appearing at the welfare office. These findings do not necessarily prove that inappropriate diversion is not occurring. However, the findings provide prima facie evidence that in most sites those families that may have been informally diverted are no worse off, and are often better off, than certified families at the time of a follow-up interview several months after first appearing at the welfare office to apply for cash assistance.

What are the content, quality, and format of data that States collect and maintain on applications, approvals, denials, and diverted applicants?

Findings from the Survey of States:

States often differ on how they define and count TANF application events. Some of the biggest differences include, for example: whether States count individuals applying for other programs as TANF applicants; how States handle individuals returning to TANF after a recent case closing; and how States count applicants who withdraw their application before eligibility can be determined.

Many States responding to the 54-State survey have also changed the events that count as “applications approved” and “applications denied.” For example, as the types of benefits funded by

³ The study distinguishes among three types of uncertified individuals: nonapplicants, applicants who did not complete the application process (“applicant non-completers”), and applicants denied TANF for circumstances (e.g., too much income, no dependent child, and other circumstances).

the TANF block grant have expanded, many States include counts of applications for benefits other than ongoing TANF cash assistance in their data on applications.

The accuracy of data on reasons for application denials is particularly subject to doubt. States use a variety of codes and do not always use mutually exclusive reason categories. Based on respondent comments, there is little reason to expect that TANF eligibility workers carefully and consistently code reasons for denial.

Many States collected application data during the period when the Federal government did not require them to do so (October 1996 through September 1999). However, about one-fourth of the States did not do so for some of the time during that period, and many of the States that did do not now have readily available data.

What are the implications of State-by-State differences in the definition and measurement of “application,” “approval,” “denial,” and “diversion,” for the interpretation and comparability of data documenting these events? How comparable are trends in applications and approvals over time and across States?

Findings from the Survey of States:

The differences in the definition and measurement of various application events are large enough to compromise the analysis of application data across States, according to information collected in the 54-State survey.

Changes in which events count as “applications approved” and “applications denied” since welfare reform also compromise the analysis of trends since AFDC within States. For example, as the types of assistance funded by the TANF Program expanded, some States began to count applicants for benefits that do not become part of the ongoing TANF caseload count. These changes also confound attempts to understand the relationship between application events and the TANF caseload. In fact, under TANF, many States count as “approvals” benefits or services that are not then counted as part of the ongoing TANF caseload.

How have the numbers of applications filed and approved changed since the end of AFDC?

Findings from the Survey of States:

From FY1996, the last year of the AFDC Program, to FY 2000, the first year in which national TANF application data are available, applications filed dropped about 19 percent, and approvals dropped about 24 percent. Also, approval rates dropped by about 4–5 percentage points over this period. It is tempting to interpret this decline as a result of TANF policy changes, given its timing. However, concurrent changes in application and approval data definitions and conventions, as well as in the external social and economic environment, confound our ability to attribute all or part of the change in approval rates to changes in welfare reform policies, in general, and to changes in application policies or processes, in particular.

What are the TANF application decisions, experiences, and results in selected TANF offices?

Using data from follow-up interviews and case record reviews, the Case Studies gathered information about application experiences and results. Among the more important statistics are those summarizing

application decisions and results. Exhibit ES-2 summarizes the decisions and outcomes for the study sample of families with children appearing at the six study sites for assistance.

Exhibit ES-2

Application Decisions and Results for Those Seeking Assistance

Decision or Result	Study Site					
	Mercer Co., NJ	Ramsey Co., MN	San Diego Co., CA	Providence, RI	Cook Co., IL	Bibb Co., GA
No application (nonapplicants)(%)	4	4	8	21	28	6
Formal diversion(%)	6	<1	0	NA	NA	NA
Denied for circumstances(%)	7	18	22	6	19	*
Denied for administrative reasons (non-completers) (%)	28	20	25	12	34	*
Certified for TANF(%)	55	57	46	61	19	51

*Bibb County withdrew from the study before case record reviews could be completed

NA = not applicable

What is the potential for individuals to be formally diverted or informally deterred from filing or completing TANF applications in selected TANF offices?

Three of the study sites included formal diversion policies, although those policies were rarely chosen by (Ramsey Co., San Diego Co.), or imposed upon (Mercer Co.) applicants. The study found far more potential for informal diversion. For example, each of the study sites normally requires at least two visits to the office to complete the application process, providing the opportunity for applicants to drop out of the process. Moreover, most sites also include a screening interview or a program orientation. These activities, often completed on the day of the initial visit to the office, allow for a preliminary exchange of information that may convince applicants that they are likely to be found ineligible, that they do not want to comply with one or more application requirements, or that the expected benefits from going through the process are too small to be worth the trouble.

The sites that have implemented applicant job search requirements have introduced an activity that has increased the burden in time and cost for applicants. In fact, in the site with the most stringent job search requirement (Cook County), 62 percent of the study sample either decided not to apply for TANF or did not complete the application process – a proportion nearly twice that of most other sites.

Research Approach to the Survey of States

Three distinct data collection efforts were undertaken for this part of the study: a survey of State TANF application policies and procedures, a survey of local office TANF application policies and practice, and a survey of State TANF application data systems and procedures.

Survey of State TANF Application Policies and Procedures

A group of 18 States was selected for the Survey of State TANF Application Processes. The goal of the 18-State survey was to explore the range and variety of policy decisions made by States. The States were purposively selected to include groups of States that have made similar application policy and procedure decisions. Exhibit ES-3 presents the States and the study selection criteria.

Exhibit ES-3

Selected Characteristics of States Included in the 18-State Survey

		Mandatory Job Search or Work-Related Requirement? (TANF Approval Rate, FY2000)			
		Yes		No	
Work-Related Requirement?	Yes	North Carolina	(.76)	Minnesota	(.79)
		Maine	(.66)	New Mexico	(.66)
		Connecticut	(.65)	Virginia	(.50)
		California*	(.61)		
		Florida	(.44)		
Lump Sum Diversion Payments?	No	New Jersey	(.79)	Pennsylvania	(.70)
		Wisconsin	(.72)	Mississippi	(.66)
		Illinois	(.49)	Indiana	(.62)
		Nevada	(.46)	Tennessee	(.58)
		Georgia	(.40)	Rhode Island	(.49)

Source for Approval Rates: DHHS

*Requirement may be implemented by county.

Note: Indiana application includes non-mandatory job search training; some Minnesota offices may impose a work-related application requirement, such as program orientation, for example; Mississippi includes a requirement of a program orientation for clients returning to TANF after a sanction.

Survey of Local Office TANF Application Policies and Practice

Twelve of the 18 States that participated in the Survey of State TANF Application Processes were selected for the Survey of Local Office TANF Application Policies and Procedures. Interviews were completed with supervisors and/or caseworkers in one of the larger offices in each of 11 of the States.

Survey of State TANF Application Data Systems and Procedures

This survey was designed to collect information on the data that States collect on the TANF application process. The survey was sent to all 50 States, the District of Columbia, and three U.S. territories. Fifty of the 54 States and territories returned completed surveys. The survey questions were designed to gather information on the definitions of events that States are using, with the intent of assessing comparability across States and over time. Questions comparing definitions under AFDC and under TANF were also included to assess comparability over time.

Detailed Findings of the Survey of States

The summary above presented the major findings of the Survey of States for each of the relevant research questions. Below, we highlight more specific findings from the three surveys.

State TANF Application Policies

Major findings regarding changes in State application policies reported by States in the 18-State survey include:

- The major changes in the TANF application process reflect overall policy emphases on developing economic independence and encouraging personal and parental responsibility.
- Many States had begun to use the application process to prepare prospective clients for important changes in cash assistance policies prior to national welfare reform in 1996. For example, about half of the sample States that introduced an employability assessment or job search requirement for applicants did so before national welfare reform. Similarly, more than half of the sample States that introduced a child immunization or school attendance requirement did so before national welfare reform.
- Among States that have imposed an employment-related application requirement, the most common is an employability assessment or screening.
- Failure to comply with some application requirements does not always result in a denial of benefits; this is an important detail when assessing the degree to which new requirements may represent an additional barrier for applicants.
- Among States with formal diversion policies, the offer of lump sum diversion payments or benefits is common, but only one requires TANF applicants to explore alternative resources or services.

Applicant Information Requirements and Office Operations

The major findings that emerge from an examination of TANF applicant information requirements and office operations in the 18-State survey include:

- Changes in applicant information requirements broadly reflect application policy changes under welfare reform.
- Some States have introduced pre-application screening forms focused on employability and employment issues, and on other social service or health needs.
- Although many States have added information and verification items tied to personal and parental responsibility, most had done so before national welfare reform in 1996.
- Although national TANF regulations do not specify timeliness standards for processing applications, most States have maintained the standards used for the AFDC Program.

Local Office TANF Application Processes

The key findings that emerge from a review of the application process in 11 local welfare offices are:

- Welfare reform has changed the application process in most of the 11 local offices in the study. Those offices have added specific activities or steps in the application process, including, for example, meetings with additional staff or other agencies, such as child support enforcement staff and employment service providers.
- Most offices have also increased the amount and types of information exchanged between applicants and agencies. For example, in many offices intake workers are now responsible for providing applicants with more extensive information about program and work requirements.
- Staff from most of the sample offices did not feel that changes made to the application process have had much effect on the willingness of individuals to apply or to complete the application process. General policy changes and increased employment opportunities outside of TANF were cited as more likely to influence application decisions. An important exception is the Dane County, Wisconsin office, in which informants felt that application policies have influenced the decision to apply for TANF. Moreover, Wisconsin is the only State in our study in which an applicant may qualify for TANF on the basis of circumstances but still be denied TANF cash benefits if deemed to be job-ready.

TANF Application Data and Trends

The key findings from the 54-State survey on TANF application data include:

- States frequently differ in how they count TANF application events. Differences across States in the minimum requirements for an application to be “filed,” as well as differences in how they count TANF applications and approvals, seriously compromise the comparability of data across States. Some of the biggest differences include, for example: whether or not States count individuals applying for other programs as TANF applicants; how States handle individuals returning to TANF after a recent case closing; and how States count applicants who withdraw their application before eligibility can be determined. More subtle inter-State differences in the meaning of a “filed application” arise when considering variations in the amount of effort and information required to file. For example, a small number of States have added pre-filing requirements since October 1996.
- Many States have also changed the events that count as “applications approved” and “applications denied.” For example, as the types of benefits funded by the TANF block grant have expanded, many States include counts of applications for benefits other than ongoing TANF cash assistance in their data on applications. In fact, these changes undermine the more direct relationship between approvals and caseload counts that existed under the AFDC Program. These changes confound the comparability of application and approval data over time within many States.
- Data on reasons for application denials are particularly subject to doubt. States use a variety of codes and do not always use mutually exclusive categories. Based on staff

comments, there is no reason to expect that TANF eligibility workers carefully and consistently code reasons for denial.

- All but one of the States that offer cash diversion payments have collected some data on the number of cases receiving those payments. However, there is variation in how diversion cases are counted. For example, just under half of the States with diversion programs include diversion recipients in their denied cases; other States do not.
- Most States collected application data during the period when the Federal government did not require States to report the data (October 1996 through September 1999). However, about one-fourth of the States did not do so for some time during that period.
- Most States enter individual TANF application data on their automated administrative data systems and archive them on a regular basis.

The key findings on TANF application and approval trends include:

- From FY1993 through FY1996, in the last years of the AFDC Program, applications and approvals declined. In the first year that States resumed reporting application data to the Federal government (FY2000), applications and approvals were at a lower level than in FY1996, but increased over the following year.
- During the periods for which national application and approval data exist, approval rates declined about 4–5 points from FY1996 to FY2000. When observing 21 States for which we have continuous application and approval data from FY1992 through FY2001, approval rates also declined, with the largest annual drop coming in FY1997, the first year of the TANF Program. It is tempting to interpret this decline as a result of TANF policy changes, given its timing. Note, however, that concurrent changes in application and approval data definitions and conventions, as well as in the external social and economic environment, confound our ability to attribute all or part of the change in approval rates to changes in TANF policies in general, or to changes in application policies or processes, in particular.

Research Approach to the Case Studies

To address its research objectives, the Case Studies include detailed descriptions of the TANF application process in six local TANF offices, as well as the opinions of local office management staff about how changes in the application process under TANF may have affected applicants' decisions. To gain more insight into the actual experiences and outcomes of individuals appearing at local welfare offices to apply for TANF, the study also included follow-up interviews with samples of certified and uncertified TANF applicants (including some who appeared at the welfare office and decided not to apply for TANF), as well as case record reviews for those individuals who did file an application.⁴

⁴ Although Bibb County, GA initially agreed to be part of the study and allowed us to identify a study sample and conduct follow-up interviews, the TANF agency withdrew from the study before the case record reviews could be completed. Consequently, the Case Study for Bibb County relies only on follow-up interviews and does not include the range of information and analyses found in the other five case study sites.

Detecting and Assessing “Informal Diversion”

When used in the context of the TANF application system, the term “informal diversion” is ambiguous, and its detection is complex. The term is ambiguous because it can have either positive or negative consequences. The specific reasons for informal diversion are also difficult to detect. For example, some informal diversions may stem from a rational assessment of the costs of applying and the probability of becoming certified for assistance. Other reasons may stem from discouragement with, or confusion about, the process.

In the Case Studies, we use three different types of evidence to judge the potential for informal diversion: the informed opinion of TANF Program caseworkers; applicant reports about their motivation and expectations in the application decision and process; and applicant behavior as reflected in the agency case record. Moreover, in an effort to distinguish potentially “inappropriate” diversion from other types, we compare the post-application situations of nonapplicants and applicant non-completers with the situation of certified applicants. When mean post-application incomes of nonapplicants and applicant non-completers are the same as, or greater than, the incomes of certified applicants, we conclude that there is no prima facie evidence that otherwise needy families are being deterred from applying for TANF.

Selecting the Case Study Sites

The selection process for the local TANF offices to be included in the Case Studies had two stages. In the first stage, 18 States were selected for the Survey of State TANF Application Policies and Procedures. The States were purposively selected to represent a range of policy choices and application approval rates. Two policies that were deemed to be of particular interest were the use of lump sum diversionary payments or vouchers and the presence of applicant job search or other work-related requirements directly related to labor force attachment. The work-related requirements included applicant job search or job search training classes or workshops, work registration, and the completion of a required employability assessment or screening.

The second stage of sample selection for the six local offices for the case studies involved several screening criteria, including, for example: the local TANF offices must have a sufficient flow of applicants to meet sampling requirements; at least some of them must include a provision for lump sum diversion payments; some of them must require applicants to conduct a job search or other work-related activity.

Exhibit ES-4 displays the final group of local or county TANF offices selected for the case studies. Note that an effort was made to include at least one local office in each of the four cells of the table, including a site that included neither formal diversion payments nor a work-related applicant requirement.

Selecting Individuals for the Follow-Up Interviews and Case Record Reviews

The Case Studies include a follow-up survey and case record reviews of individuals appearing at the welfare office with the apparent intention of applying for TANF. The major purpose of these data collection activities was to track a sample of individuals interested in applying for TANF benefits to determine if they applied, and, if so, if they completed the application process and became certified for TANF. The follow-up survey was also used to document the status of sample members at a time between 3 and 9 months after first appearing at the welfare office.

Exhibit ES-4**Selected Characteristics of Local TANF Offices included in the Case Studies**

		Job Search or Work-Related Requirement?	
		Yes	No
Lump Sum Diversion Payments?	Yes	San Diego County, CA Mercer County, NJ ^a	Ramsey County, MN
	No	Cook County, IL ^b Bibb County, GA	Providence, RI

^aMercer County offers lump sum payments to applicants diverted to the Early Employment Initiative.

^bTwo neighboring TANF offices in Chicago were chosen to meet sampling requirements.

To identify individuals potentially interested in applying for TANF, we asked reception staff in each of the local offices in the case studies to ask individuals appearing at the office (and not already receiving benefits) if they were interested in learning about, or applying for, cash assistance and if they had children at home. Those individuals were then given information about the study, including the follow-up interviews and case record reviews. Those who volunteered to be in the study filled out a brief information sheet that included contact information for the follow-up interviews.

The research design for the Case Studies included a stratified sample for each site of 100 individuals certified for TANF and 100 individuals uncertified for TANF. To identify a sample member's application decision and result, contact sheet information was routinely sent back to study offices where agency staff checked to see whether: (1) an individual had filed a TANF application within 30 days of completing a contact sheet; and (2) if so, the result of the application. This information was then used to stratify the universe of those completing contact sheets prior to sampling for the follow-up surveys and case record reviews.

Chapter One: Introduction and Overview

Study Background

Over the past two decades, the nation's primary cash assistance program for low-income families with children has been transformed. Beginning in the 1980s, with the active encouragement of the Federal government, many States took advantage of a provision of the Social Security Act to experiment with changes in the Aid to Families With Dependent Children (AFDC) Program. The pace of change accelerated with the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996, which replaced AFDC with the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Program.

From the time that TANF was implemented until now, the nation's welfare caseload has been cut by more than half. Although it is difficult to measure the specific contribution to the decline made by various factors, there is broad consensus on those major factors. For example, one is the longest period of sustained economic growth in the country's history, finally slowing down in early 2001, which allowed some welfare families to leave the rolls and other families to avoid participation in cash assistance altogether. Another generally accepted factor is the long-term secular change that has made it acceptable and expected for mothers, including single mothers, to leave the household for the workplace. Finally, most observers concede that changes in policies and procedures—both those that anticipated TANF and those that followed TANF—also contributed to the decline.

Among the most notable changes under TANF and earlier State-initiated welfare reform efforts are those regarding time limits and work requirements. For example, under TANF most individuals may not receive Federally funded TANF assistance for more than 60 months over a lifetime; many States have imposed even shorter time limits. Adult TANF recipients are also subject to more extensive work requirements than under AFDC. Moreover, the work requirements are applied to larger groups of recipients, and in many States the penalties for violating these requirements became far more stringent.

Welfare reform under PRWORA and earlier State efforts have changed the application process for cash assistance. States were granted broad flexibility in setting requirements and rules covering TANF applications. In some States, applicants face new employment-related requirements such as job search or an employability assessment. Some States have sought to change other behaviors and have imposed school attendance or immunization requirements for the children of applicants. Diversion programs that offer lump sum cash or voucher payments in lieu of ongoing benefits, or that require an applicant to attempt to gain access to community services, have also been added.

There is a substantial and growing body of research on the effects of policies for program *participants* introduced under TANF or under earlier State-initiated welfare reform experiments. Much less is known, however, about how changes in TANF application policies and procedures may have affected the decisions, experiences, and outcomes of TANF *applicants*. The main purpose of the Study of the TANF Application Process is to help fill that gap. Of particular interest is the degree to which changes under TANF have affected both formal diversion (such as accepting lump sum cash payments in lieu of ongoing cash assistance) and informal diversion (prospective or actual applicants

either not applying or dropping out of the process who might otherwise have applied or completed the application process).

The Study has two major parts: the Survey of States and the Case Studies. The Survey of States, included in Section One of this Final Report, includes findings of a number of State-level and local-office data collection efforts and analyses focused on TANF application policies and procedures and on the content, quality, and format of TANF application data. Specifically, the study included a survey of 54 States and territories (“54-State survey”) focusing principally on which TANF application data are collected and maintained, a survey of 18 selected states (“18-State survey”) focusing principally on TANF application policies, and a survey of 11 local TANF offices¹ (“11-office survey”) focusing principally on application procedures.

The Case Studies, included in Section Two of this Final Report, focus on TANF application policies and procedures, as well as the application experiences and outcomes for a sample of families seeking assistance, in six selected local welfare offices: Mercer County (Trenton), NJ; Ramsey County (St. Paul), MN; San Diego County (San Diego), CA; Providence, RI; Cook County (Chicago), IL; and Bibb County (Macon), GA.

The two parts of this study were designed to address a set of major research questions organized around the goal of learning more about the TANF application process, and how it may affect applicant experiences and outcomes. The research objectives and their relationship to the two parts of the study are summarized in Exhibit 1.1. The remainder of this chapter describes the research approach for the Survey of States and the Case Studies, respectively.

Exhibit 1.1

Relationship of Study Parts to Research Questions

What are official State-level application policies and procedures for TANF cash assistance, how have they changed the nature of the application process since the end of the AFDC Program, and how do they differ from State to State?	Survey of States
How does the TANF intake and application process operate in selected local TANF Program offices and how has it changed since the end of the AFDC Program?	Survey of States, Case Studies
What is the evidence concerning the possible contribution of changes in the application process to changes in individuals’ decisions to apply?	Survey of States; Case Studies
What are the content, quality, and format of data that States collect and maintain on applications, approvals, denials, and diverted applicants?	Survey of States
What are the implications of State-by-State differences in the definition and measurement of “application,” “approval,” “denial,” and “diversion” for the interpretation and comparability of data documenting those events?	Survey of States
How have the numbers of applications filed and approved changed since the implementation of the TANF Program? How comparable are trends in applications and approvals over time and across States?	Survey of States
What are the TANF application decisions, experiences, and results in selected TANF offices?	Case Studies
What is the potential for individuals to be either formally diverted or informally deterred from filing TANF applications in selected local offices?	Case Studies

¹ Although 12 offices were initially selected for the study, only 11 could complete the survey in time for this report.

Research Approach of the Survey of States

This phase of the Study of the TANF Application Process was designed to address the following research objectives.

- What are the official State-level application policies and procedures for TANF cash assistance and how have they changed the nature of the application process since the end of the AFDC Program?
- How does the TANF intake and application process operate in selected local TANF Program offices, and how has it changed since the end of the AFDC Program?
- What is the evidence concerning the impact of changes in the application process on application decisions?
- What are the content, quality, and format of data that States collect and maintain on applications, approvals, denials, and diverted applicants?
- What are the implications of State-by-State differences in the definition and measurement of “application,” “approval,” “denial,” and “diversion,” for the interpretation and comparability of data documenting these events? How comparable are trends in applications and approvals over time and across States?
- How have the numbers of applications filed and approved changed since the end of AFDC?

Three distinct data collection efforts were undertaken for this part of the study: a survey of State TANF application policies and procedures, a survey of local office TANF application policies and practice, and a survey of State TANF application data systems and procedures. Exhibit 1.2 shows the relationship of the data collection efforts to the research objectives of the Survey of States.

Survey of State TANF Application Data Systems and Procedures

This survey was designed to collect information on the data that States collect on the TANF application process. The survey was sent to all 50-States, the District of Columbia, and three U.S. territories—Guam, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands.² Fifty respondents returned completed surveys for a response rate of 93 percent. Ohio, Montana, New York, and the Virgin Islands did not return surveys. In California the survey was conducted with the San Diego county office. Administrative data systems in California are implemented at the county level and answers to most of the questions on data systems could only be answered at that level. San Diego is part of a consortium of other counties that share the same data system.

The survey questions were developed to elicit information on the definitions of application events and results that States are using, with the intent of assessing comparability across States. Questions comparing definitions from before and after national welfare reform were also included to assess comparability over time.³ The survey instrument is included as Appendix A of this report.

² Federal law makes all U.S. territories eligible to participate in the TANF Program, but two territories, Northern Marianas and American Samoa, have chosen not to participate. Therefore, these territories were not included in the survey.

³ Throughout this report “national welfare reform” refers to PRWORA.

Exhibit 1.2**Research Questions, Issues, and Data Sources for the Survey of States**

Major Research Objective	Specific Research Issues and Questions	Data Source
What are the official State-level application policies and procedures for TANF cash assistance and how have they changed the nature of the application process since the end of the AFDC Program?	State policies regarding: diversion benefits; pre-application requirements; employment and non-employment related application requirements; administrative practices of local welfare offices; administrative appeals process.	Survey of State TANF application policies and procedures
How does the TANF intake and application process operate in selected local TANF Program offices and how has it changed since the end of the AFDC Program?	Steps in filing and completing the TANF application Information that must be provided by the applicant Completion of employment and non-employment related requirements Degree of discretion of local office workers	Survey of local office TANF application policies and practice
What is the qualitative evidence concerning the impact of changes in the application process on application decisions?	Changes at the local level Opinions of local office management and staff	Survey of local office TANF application policies and practice
What are the content, quality, and format of data that States collect and maintain on applications, approvals, denials, and diverted applicants?	Data items collected State statistical reports on application data Maintenance of data over time Data definitions Data quality Use of data for quality control and other management information	Survey of State TANF application data systems and procedures Data provided by States
What are the implications of State-by-State differences in the definition and measurement of application events? How comparable are trends in applications and approvals over time and across States?	Identify and assess differences in data content, definitions, systems, and reliability across States and over time	Survey of State TANF application data systems and procedures
How have the numbers of applications filed and approved changed since the end of AFDC?	Levels and trends in TANF applications and approvals Levels and trends in AFDC applications and approvals Differences in TANF and AFDC levels and trends	Survey of State TANF application data systems and procedures Other State-level data

States were asked to provide available data on applications filed, approved, and denied. In addition, States were requested to send available data on reasons for denial and the number of applicants who received diversion payments. To minimize the burden on State respondents, States were not asked to undertake special data runs to provide the data.

Survey of State TANF Application Policies and Procedures⁴

A smaller group of 18 States was selected for the Survey of State TANF Application Policies and Procedures. The goal of the 18-State survey was to explore the range and variety of policy decisions made by States. The States were purposively selected to represent a range of policy choices and application approval rates. Two policies that were deemed to be of particular interest were the use of lump sum diversionary payments or vouchers and the presence of applicant job search or other work-related requirements directly related to labor force attachment. The work-related requirements included applicant job search or job search training classes or workshops, work registration, and the completion of a required employability assessment or screening. Work registration involves notifying the State Employment Security office or similar agency that an applicant is seeking work and available for employment. These policies have the potential to affect the decisions that individuals make about applying for, and completing the application for, TANF benefits.

For this part of the study, States were selected that had implemented both of these policies, only one of them, and neither of them. Once States were grouped by their policy choices the goal was to select States within those groups that had a range of TANF application approval rates based on data they provide to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). Two of the States selected initially declined to participate in this phase of the study; alternative States with similar characteristics were chosen. Exhibit 1.3 displays the final list of 18 States, their policies, and their annual average approval rates for the Federal fiscal year 2000. The policies displayed in the exhibit reflect State reports on the surveys done for this project.⁵

⁴ In this report, “policies” and “procedures” refer to written rules and guidelines at either the State-, county-, or local-office level. “Practices” and “process” refer to actual operations

⁵ In some cases, the information collected differed from the information initially used to classify the States for sample selection purposes. For example, New Jersey was originally selected because it was listed as having both diversion and a work-related requirement, but in the State policy survey the State reported that it does not have a diversion program that provides payments or vouchers in lieu of cash assistance. New Mexico had been listed as not having a diversion program, but in the survey for this project indicated that they do now have a program. Despite some shifting in initial categorization the States selected continue to represent a range of policy choices on the sample selection criteria.

It is in the nature of our purposive sampling that selected groups are not representative in a statistical sense of all States that include the policies that were sampled. The purpose is rather to include States that may show some range in policy decisions within each “cell” of the sampling framework.

Exhibit 1.3**Selected Characteristics of States Included in the 18-State Survey**

		Mandatory Job Search or Work-Related Requirement? (TANF Approval Rate, FY2000)			
		Yes		No	
Lump Sum Diversion Payments?	Yes	North Carolina	(.76)	Minnesota	(.79)
		Maine	(.66)	New Mexico	(.66)
		Connecticut	(.65)	Virginia	(.50)
		California*	(.61)		
		Florida	(.44)		
	No	New Jersey	(.79)	Pennsylvania	(.70)
		Wisconsin	(.72)	Mississippi	(.66)
		Illinois	(.49)	Indiana	(.62)
		Nevada	(.46)	Tennessee	(.58)
		Georgia	(.40)	Rhode Island	(.49)

Source for Approval Rates: DHHS

*Requirement may be implemented by county.

Note: Indiana application includes non-mandatory job search training; some Minnesota offices may impose a work-related application requirement, such as program orientation, for example; Mississippi includes a requirement of a program orientation for clients returning to TANF after a sanction.

Each of the 18 States was asked to provide policy manuals and materials that are given to applicants. Research staff reviewed the manuals and completed a policy abstraction form. The abstraction form was designed to document detailed information on State policies. The form covered State requirements that applicants must complete prior to being approved for TANF. Additional details included: when the policy was implemented, which applicants it applies to, and what the consequences are for failure to meet the requirement. Once the form was completed it was returned to the State contacts to be reviewed for accuracy and to fill in any missing information. Follow-up telephone contacts were made when the information provided by the State was unclear or appeared to contradict the information in the manual. Responses were obtained from all 18 States. In California the policy interview was conducted with the San Diego county office.⁶ Many decisions about policy in California are decentralized and answers to most of the questions on policies could only be answered at the county level. The policy abstraction form is included as Appendix B of the report.

Survey of Local Office TANF Application Policies and Practices

Twelve of the eighteen States that participated in the Survey of State TANF Application Processes were selected for the Survey of Local Office TANF Application Policies and Practices. States were asked to provide the name of one of their larger local offices. The local office was contacted and asked to provide the name of senior staff to complete a detailed telephone interview regarding the steps in the application process and how the process has changed since national welfare reform. Interviews were completed in 11 of the 12 local offices.⁷

⁶ In California the State sets general policy direction and establishes some Statewide policies, but most details in policies and procedures are set by counties. A State-level interview would have not provided enough detail to flesh out application policies and procedures.

⁷ Due to administrative turnover in the local North Carolina office, an interview could not be completed in the time allotted for data collection.

We included local office interviews in the study for several reasons. First, some aspects of the TANF application process are only known at the local office level, rather than at the State level. This may be particularly true in States, such as California and Wisconsin, that have county-administered systems. Second, many States have included policy options to be decided at the county- or local-office level. Third, actual policy implementation happens at the local office level, and a fuller understanding and knowledge of the application process requires data collection at the local office level. Finally, because local office staff interact with potential applicants, applicants, and clients on a daily basis, we thought it important to ask local office staff their opinions of how changes under welfare reform may have affected application decisions and results.

In most cases, interviews were conducted with a supervisor and a case manager. In some cases the office was only able to offer one respondent and in others there were additional staff involved in the process and they were interviewed. Respondents were asked to specify each step in the process, the information provided by the office, the actions required of the applicant. Respondents were also asked their opinions about how TANF may have affected application decisions. The survey instrument is included as Appendix C of the report.

The remaining six States that participated in the Survey of State TANF Application Processes were selected for case studies. In these offices detailed qualitative interviews were conducted with a range of staff, including administrators and line staff. The approach to this part of the study is described in the next section.

Research Approach of the Case Studies

The Case Studies were designed to address the following research objectives:

- How does the TANF intake and application process operate in selected local TANF Program offices and how has it changed since the end of the AFDC Program?
- What is the potential for individuals to be formally or informally diverted from filing TANF applications in selected TANF offices?
- What is the evidence concerning the possible contribution of changes in the application process to changes in individuals' decisions to apply and to complete the application process?
- What are the TANF application decisions, experiences, and results in selected TANF offices?

The case study approach was chosen as the research design for these questions for several reasons. First, it offered the most efficient way to explore in detail how the TANF application process operates in selected local offices and to link data about individuals' application decisions, experiences, and outcomes to application policies and behavioral and informational requirements. Second, in the absence of specific hypotheses about how changes in the application process under TANF may have affected application behavior and outcomes, the case study approach offered an open-ended conceptual framework in which to explore how the application process works. Third, States and counties were granted wide discretion in shaping overall TANF policies and the TANF application process, resulting in wide variations in policies and procedures. A research strategy based on

selecting and studying a national probability sample of local TANF offices would have been well beyond the intended scope of the study.

To address these research issues, the Case Studies include detailed descriptions of the TANF application process in six local TANF offices, as well as the opinions of local office management staff about how changes in the application process under TANF may have affected applicants' decisions. To gain more insight into the actual experiences and outcomes of individuals appearing at local welfare offices to apply for TANF, the study also included follow-up interviews with samples of certified and uncertified TANF applicants (including some who appeared at the welfare office and decided not to apply for TANF), as well as applicant case record reviews of the same individuals.⁸ (The instruments for the Follow-Up Survey and the Case Record Reviews are included as Appendices G and H, respectively.)

Detecting and Assessing “Informal Diversion”

When used in the context of the TANF application system, the terms “informal diversion” or “informal deterrence” are ambiguous, and their detection is complex. The terms are ambiguous because they can have either positive or negative consequences. For example, when obviously ineligible prospective or actual applicants learn of their likely ineligibility early on in the process, both the applicants and the agency avoid needless costs. Similarly, when applicants facing formal job search or employment-related behavioral requirements decide that they can find work on their own and therefore drop out of the application process, diversion or deterrence may ultimately lead to an independent job search and eventual employment.

The specific reasons for informal diversion or deterrence are also difficult to detect. For example, some informal diversions may stem from a rational assessment of the costs of applying and the probability of becoming certified for assistance. Other reasons may stem from discouragement with, or confusion about, the process.

In the Case Studies, we use three different types of evidence to judge the potential for informal diversion or deterrence: the informed opinion of TANF Program caseworkers; applicant reports about their motivation and expectations in the application decision and process; and applicant behavior as reflected in the agency case record. Moreover, in an effort to distinguish potentially “negative” diversion from other types, we compare the post-application situations of nonapplicants and applicant non-completers with the situation of certified applicants. When mean post-application incomes of nonapplicants and applicant non-completers are the same as or greater than the incomes of certified applicants, we determine that there is no prima facie evidence that otherwise needy families are being diverted from applying or completing applications for TANF.

⁸ Although Bibb County, GA initially agreed to be part of the study and allowed us to identify a study sample and conduct follow-up interviews, the TANF agency withdrew from the study before the case record reviews could be completed. Consequently, the Case Study for Bibb County relies only on follow-up interviews and does not include the range of information and analyses found in the other five case study sites.

Selecting the Cases Study Sites

In keeping within the overall framework of the case study approach, a two-stage purposive sampling procedure was used to select the case study sites. The object of purposive sampling is not to create a representative sample of analytic units, but rather to choose units that are individual examples (“cases”) of the likely range of characteristics of interest. The goal of such sampling is to gain insight into the kind of variation likely to be encountered in a representative sample or a population census, as well as to generate hypotheses about the impacts such variation may have on outcomes of interest. The hypotheses may then be tested under different sampling and analytic strategies.

As detailed above in the section describing the approach to the Survey of States, the selection process for the local TANF offices to be included in the Case Studies had two stages. In the first stage, 18 States were selected for the Survey of State TANF Application Policies and Procedures. The States were purposively selected to represent a range of policy choices and application approval rates.⁹ Two policies that were deemed to be of particular interest were the use of lump sum diversionary payments or vouchers and the presence of applicant job search or other work-related requirements directly related to labor force attachment. The work-related requirements included applicant job search or job search training classes or workshops, work registration, and the completion of a required employability assessment or screening.

All 54 States and territories were grouped on a contingency table by whether they included diversion payments and work requirements for TANF applicants. Within each of the four cells, States were also ranked by their reported TANF approval rates. Exhibit 1.3 above displays the final list of 18 States, their policies, and their annual average approval rates for the Federal fiscal year 2000.

The second stage of sample selection for the six local offices for the Case Studies involved several screening criteria:

- the local TANF offices must have a sufficient flow of applicants to meet sampling requirements within the projected study schedule (about 100 or more TANF applicants monthly);
- at least some of the case study offices must include a provision for lump sum or other types of diversion payments;
- at least some of the case study offices must require applicants to conduct a job search or other work-related activity as a condition for certification; and
- local office files must be able to distinguish between denials based on applicant circumstances and denials based on incomplete applications.

Exhibit 1.4 displays the final group of local or county TANF offices selected for the case studies.

⁹ Application approval rates were used as very rough indications of how “difficult” the TANF application may be to negotiate. Note that it is not necessarily true that States with lower approval rates have a higher incidence of informal diversion, or that the converse is true. Approval rates are usually calculated as the proportion of applicants that are certified within a given time period.

Exhibit 1.4**Selected Characteristics of Local TANF Offices included in the Case Studies**

		Job Search or Work-Related Requirement?	
		Yes	No
Lump Sum Diversion Payments?	Yes	San Diego County, CA Mercer County, NJ ^a	Ramsey County, MN
	No	Cook County, IL ^b Bibb County, GA	Providence, RI

^a In Mercer County, applicants diverted to the Early Employment Initiative (EEI) Program receive lump sum payments to support job search.

^b Two neighboring TANF offices in Chicago were chosen to meet sampling requirements.

Selecting Individuals for the Follow-Up Interviews and Case Record Reviews

As mentioned above, the Case Studies include a follow-up survey and case record reviews of individuals appearing at the welfare office with the apparent intention of applying for TANF. The major purpose of these data collection activities was to track a sample of individuals interested in applying for TANF benefits to determine if they applied and, if so, if they completed the application process and became certified for TANF. The results of the follow-up interviews and case record reviews provide some insight into the degree to which measures introduced under TANF may discourage or otherwise divert individuals from applying for TANF or from completing the application process.

To identify individuals potentially interested in applying for TANF, we asked reception staff in each of the local offices in the case studies to ask individuals appearing at the office (and not already receiving benefits) if they were interested in learning about, or applying for, cash assistance and if they had children at home.¹⁰ Those individuals were then given information about the study, including the follow-up interviews and case record reviews. Those who volunteered to be in the study filled out a brief information sheet that included contact information for the follow-up interviews.¹¹ Exhibit 1.5 indicates the number of individuals who completed contact sheets during the period of sample buildup in each study site.

¹⁰ The system in Ramsey County, Minnesota worked slightly differently. There, it is not the normal practice for reception staff to inquire in detail about individuals' intentions or situations, but to register these individuals, check the automated system for current benefit receipt, and distribute the application form. Those who complete and sign the first page of the form then meet with a client access worker, who asks some preliminary questions about visitors' situations. Because we wanted to include in our sample people who only contacted a receptionist and decided not to meet with a client access worker, we implemented sample identification at the reception station. However, some individuals who signed the contact sheets had to be subsequently screened out of the study sample because they did not have dependent children at home or otherwise made it clear to the access worker that they were not interested in learning about, or applying for, cash assistance.

¹¹ Reception staff were asked to monitor the number of individuals refusing to complete a contact sheet. In all six sites staff reported that very few individuals declined to complete a contact sheet during the period of sample buildup. Prospective study sample members were offered \$15 if they were chosen for the study and completed the follow-up interview.

Exhibit 1.5**Total Number of Contact Sheets Received and Sample Buildup Time Frame**

Research site	Total Number of Contact Sheets	Sample Buildup Started	Sample Buildup Ended
Mercer County, NJ	519	9/24/2001	3/18/2002
Ramsey County, MN	599	10/10/2001	3/7/2002
San Diego County, CA	473	10/29/2001	3/15/2002
Providence, RI	540	1/14/2002	4/12/2002
Cook County, IL	762	11/9/2001	8/29/02
Bibb County, GA	567	10/31/2001	3/25/2002

The research design for the study included a stratified sample for each site of 100 individuals certified for TANF and 100 individuals uncertified for TANF. (Note that the uncertified sample stratum also includes individuals who decided not to apply for TANF.) There were several reasons to stratify. First, we wanted to include a sufficient sample of uncertified individuals to describe their experiences, the degree to which they completed an application, how far they went in the process, the reasons for denial, and their application experiences and opinions. Second, we wanted to compare certified and uncertified individuals to see if they are systematically different. Note that unless specified otherwise, “uncertified” includes both uncertified applicants and nonapplicants.

To identify a sample member’s application decision and result, contact sheet information was routinely sent back to study offices where agency staff checked to see whether: (1) an individual had filed a TANF application within 30 days of completing a contact sheet; and (2) if so, the result of the application. This information was then used to stratify the universe of those completing contact sheets prior to sampling for the follow-up surveys and case record reviews. Our initial target response rate for the surveys was 75 percent. To achieve this rate and provide 100 completed interviews per sample stratum, we randomly selected 133 names per site from each of the sample strata.¹² Exhibit 1.6 illustrates the sampling process for the follow-up interviews and case record reviews. Exhibit 1.7 displays the number of individuals, as well as the breakdown by stratum that comprised the universe from which respondents were surveyed. Finally, Exhibit 1.8 displays final survey response rates for each site.¹³

¹² The 75 percent response rate was not achieved for the two sample strata in each site. For some strata, supplementary sample members (10 –30), depending on the site and the shortfall in completed surveys) were added to the follow-up survey to total 100 completed interviews. Note that case record reviews were completed for all of the individuals sampled for the follow-up surveys, whether they responded to the surveys or not. This strategy saved time and created a way to test for nonresponse bias in the interviews (see Appendix F). Note also that due to the relatively low certification rate in Chicago, all of the individuals in the certified applicant stratum were included in the follow-up survey. For statistical purposes, this group may still be considered a random sample since it comprises individuals who appeared at the Chicago study offices within a limited time span. Survey response rates are included in Exhibit 1.7, below.

¹³ The exhibit presents rates based on initial stratum identification. Subsequent case record reviews revealed some errors in initial stratum identification. The analyses in each case study are based on corrected stratum designations.

Exhibit 1.6

The Sample Frame for the Follow-up Interviews and Case Reviews

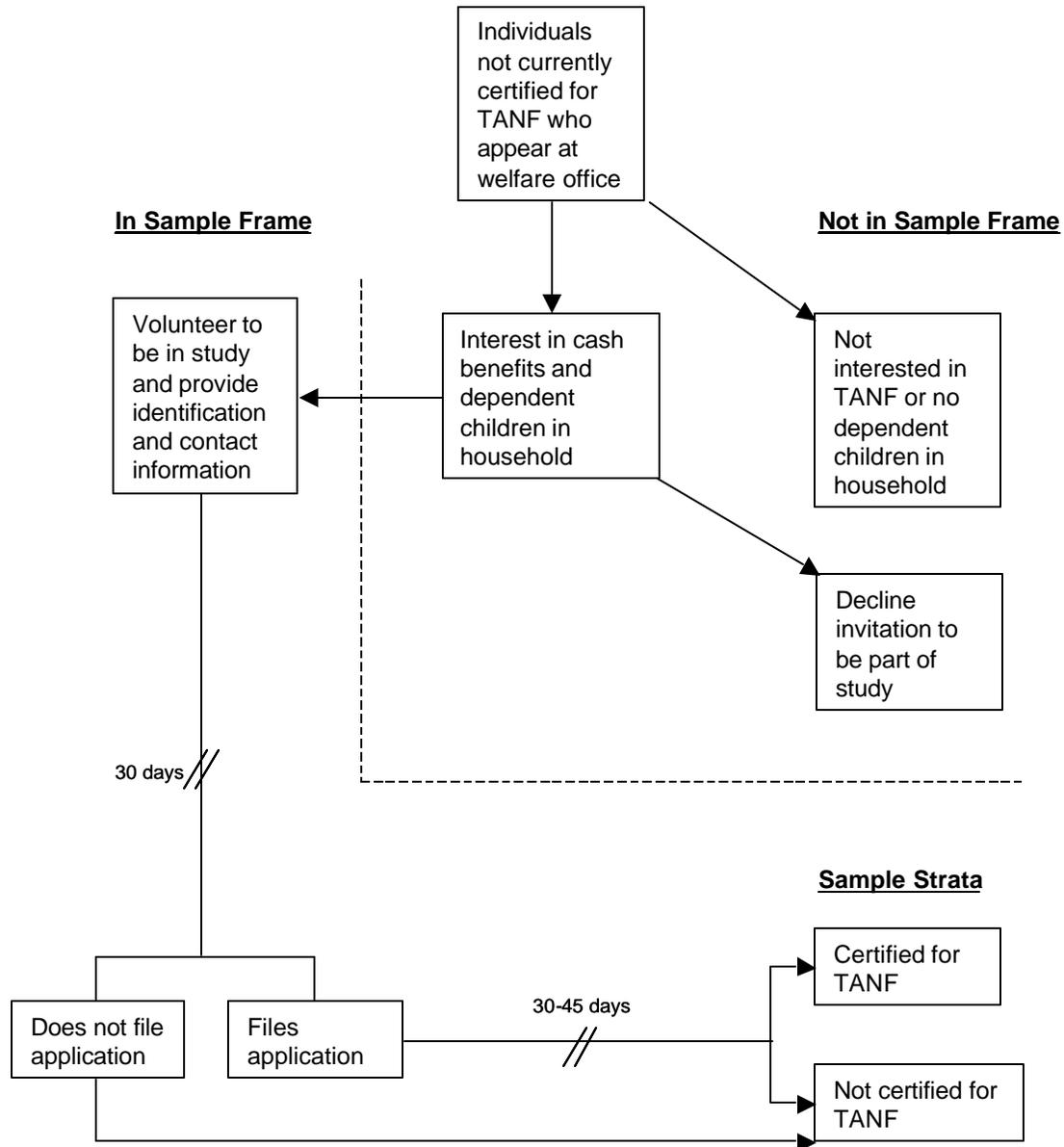


Exhibit 1.7**Survey Sample Frame and Strata**

Research site	Number in sample frame	Percentage Certified	Percentage Uncertified
Mercer County, NJ	402	55%	45%
Ramsey County, MN	365	57%	43%
San Diego County, CA	319	46%	54%
Providence, RI	423	61%	39%
Cook County, IL	691	19%	81%
Bibb County, GA	372	43%	57%

Exhibit 1.8**Final Response Rates for Follow-up Survey**

Research Site	Certified Families		Uncertified Families	
	Response rate (%)	Completed interviews/Sample size	Response rate (%)	Completed interviews/Sample size
Mercer Co., NJ	75	100/133	65	100/155
Ramsey Co., MN	75	100/133	70	100/142
San Diego Co., CA	71	110/154	59	91/153
Providence, RI	76	101/133	65	100/153
Cook Co., IL	76	100/132	75	100/133
Bibb Co., GA	75	100/133	65	100/153

A Note on Terminology

In the case studies section of this report, the major focus of analysis is the “family,” which is intended to be synonymous with the TANF assistance unit, usually consisting of a parent or parents and biological or adopted children or grandchildren. The “prospective applicant” is the person who appeared at the welfare office with a potential interest in applying for TANF. In most instances, that person is identical to the TANF case head were the family to be certified for TANF.¹⁴ Some of the tables also refer to the “household,” which is the family plus any other adults living with the family. Some minimal household data are included because the family may be living with other adults who may provide some support for family expenses. When the terms “income” or “monthly income” are used in the text or in tables, they are based on responses to the following survey question: “Now, please think about all the sources of income that you and your children will have [this or that] month?” The question was intended to capture information about all earned and unearned income, including assistance payments and other government cash benefits such as Social Security benefits, Veterans benefits, and Unemployment Compensation. It was also intended to include the value of food stamps, but not necessarily the value of other work supports such as bus tokens and child care vouchers, and subsidies for items such as housing, transportation, or other needs.

Organization of the Findings

The remainder of the report is devoted to exploring the findings from the two parts of the study. Section One reports on the findings from the Survey of States. The chapters are organized as follows:

- **Chapter Two. State TANF Application Policies.** State policies on employment-related TANF application requirements, non-employment related requirements, and diversion payments are described.
- **Chapter Three. Application Information Requirements and Office Operations.** Changes in application information and verification requirements, and State management and monitoring of the TANF application process are explored.
- **Chapter Four. Local Office TANF Application Practices.** Findings from the Survey of Local Office TANF Application Policies and Practices are discussed. A graphic illustration of the application process is included for each office where a local interview was conducted.
- **Chapter Five. TANF Application Data and Trends.** This chapter examines what data States have available on the application process. Special attention is paid to the data collected during the period when States were not required to submit application data to DHHS. State definitions of various data elements are described and an assessment of the comparability of data across States is offered.
- **Chapter Six. Concluding Observations.** This chapter addresses the major research questions and provides summary responses based on the data from the Survey of States.

¹⁴ This may not always be the case, and is particularly difficult to confirm for nonapplicants. However, in every instance in which a case record review was completed, the individual identified as the TANF case head in agency application records is the same person identified as the respondent for the follow-up survey and hence identified as the prospective applicant in appropriate tables.

Section Two reports on the findings from the case studies. The chapters are organized as follows:

- **Chapters Seven–Twelve.** Each chapter includes a detailed description of the application process in a study site, including a model of the process focusing on the information exchanged and applicant decision points.
- **Chapter Thirteen. Cross-Site Summary and Conclusions.** This chapter synthesizes the findings from all of the case studies and draws overarching conclusions.

The Report appendices include:

- **Appendix A. Survey of State TANF Application Data Systems and Procedures**
- **Appendix B. 18-State Survey of State TANF Application Policies Policy Abstraction Form**
- **Appendix C. Local Office Survey of State TANF Application Process**
- **Appendix D. Detailed Tables from the 18-State Survey of State TANF Application Policies Policy Abstraction Form**
- **Appendix E. Detailed Tables from the Survey of State TANF Application Data Systems and Procedures**
- **Appendix F. Supplemental Web-Based Survey of States**
- **Appendix G. Follow-Up Survey Instrument**
- **Appendix H. Case Record Review Form**
- **Appendix I. Calculating Sample Weights**
- **Appendix J. Testing for Non-Response Bias**

Section I:

Findings from the Survey of States

Chapter Two:

State TANF Application Policies and Procedures

This chapter addresses the question, “What are the official TANF application policies and procedures and how have they changed since the passage and implementation of national welfare reform?” The focus is on 18 States purposively chosen based on variations in application policies and application approval rates. The key findings that emerge from an examination of the application policies implemented by the 18 States included in the State policy survey are:

- The major changes in the TANF application process reflect overall policy emphases on developing economic independence and encouraging personal and parental responsibility.
- Many States had begun to use the application process to prepare prospective clients for important changes in cash assistance policies prior to national welfare reform in 1996. For example, about half of the study States that introduced an employability assessment or job search requirement for applicants did so before national welfare reform. Similarly, more than half of the sample States that introduced a requirement to document child immunizations or school attendance did so before national welfare reform.
- Among the study States that have imposed an employment-related application requirement, the most common is an employability assessment or screening.
- Failure to comply with some application requirements does not always result in a denial of benefits; this is an important detail when assessing the degree to which new requirements may represent an additional barrier for applicants.
- Among the study States with formal diversion policies, the offer of lump sum diversion payments or benefits is common, but only one requires TANF applicants to explore alternative resources or services.

This chapter describes State application policies and procedures in detail, while Chapter Four will examine how those policies and procedures are implemented in a local office. For discussion purposes, application requirements and policies are categorized into three groups:

- **Employment-Related TANF Application Requirements.** These include the three work-related requirements that were used in sample selection (i.e., job search or job search training, employability assessments or screenings, and work registration). In addition, this category also includes attendance at orientation sessions. While orientation sessions may also cover issues outside of employment, they typically include a substantial focus on work requirements and the ultimate goal of self-sufficiency through employment.

- **Non-Employment-Related TANF Application Requirements.** These include signing a personal responsibility plan (which typically includes both employment-related and non-employment-related behavioral expectations), cooperation with child support enforcement, child immunizations, regular school attendance for minor children, other behavioral requirements, and a requirement that applicants be finger-imaged or fingerprinted.
- **State TANF Diversion Policies.** These include the offer of cash or voucher payments as an alternative to the ongoing receipt of TANF cash benefits. The other policy included in this category is the requirement for applicants to explore alternative resources, such as assistance from community organizations, before being approved for cash assistance.

Employment-Related TANF Application Requirements

Ten States were purposively selected on the basis of some employment-related TANF application requirement; three additional States either include a requirement for certain applicants or include a non-mandatory opportunity to attend a program orientation or to engage in job search. Exhibit 2.1 shows the sample States imposing these requirements before and after October 1996, when the national welfare reform law went into effect. The exhibit indicates that many States had begun to implement employment-related application requirements prior to the passage of national welfare reform. This finding is consistent with previous findings that many States had begun to make fundamental changes in their AFDC Programs prior to the passage of PRWORA in 1996 (Zedlewski, et. al, 1998).

Different types of requirements tended to be implemented before and after national welfare reform. States had clearly begun to focus on changing the message of welfare to that of a transitional program leading to self-sufficiency prior to 1996. In fact, more of the study States implemented applicant job search or job search training and employability assessments prior to the implementation of national welfare reform than did so afterwards. More States implemented a requirement for applicants to attend an orientation session after welfare reform than any other employment-related requirement. This may have arisen from the need to implement a formal procedure to inform applicants of the new requirements.

Exhibit 2.2 provides a State-by-State listing of employment-related TANF application requirements, along with information on whether failure to complete the requirement results in an application denial, whether the requirement predates national welfare reform, and whether the policy is mandatory or optional for local offices. Requirements that do not result in an application denial can result in cases being opened with reduced benefits. The key findings are:

- Most of the States with a work-related requirement impose multiple requirements.
- In Florida and North Carolina, local offices may impose all four of the employment-related application requirements (not counting the “other requirements” category). Both States have two optional requirements. Wisconsin imposes three of the four requirements, with all of them predating national welfare reform.

Exhibit 2.1

**Timing of Implementation of Employment-Related TANF Application Requirements
(in 18 Selected States)**

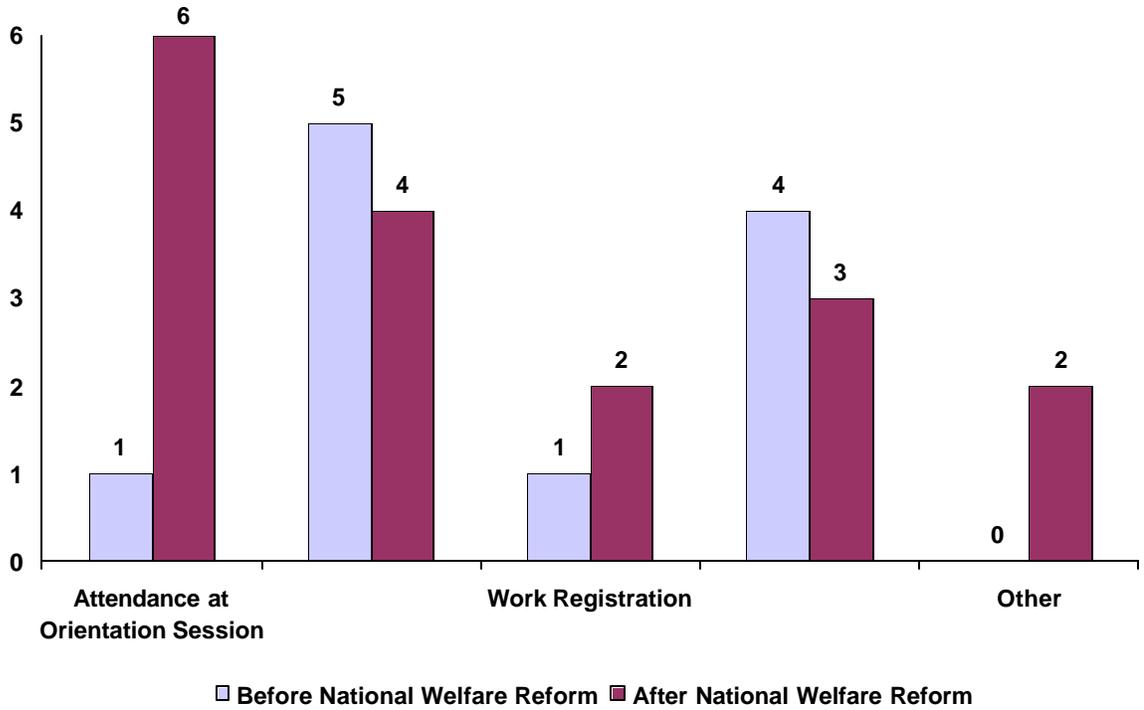


Exhibit 2.2

Employment-Related TANF Application Requirements (in 18 Selected States)

State	Requirements				
	Attendance at Orientation Session	Employability Assessments/ Screening	Work Registration	Job Search or Job Search Training	Other
California (San Diego County)	✓				
Connecticut	✓	✓ ^{pre}			
Florida	✓	✓ ^o	✓	✓ ^o	✓ ^o
Georgia		✓ ^{pre}		✓ ^{pre}	
Illinois		✓		✓	✓
Indiana				✓ nd	
Maine	✓	✓ ^{pre, nd}			
Minnesota	✓ nd				
Mississippi	✓ ^{pre, a}				
Nevada		✓		✓ ^{pre}	
New Jersey		✓ ^{pre}			
New Mexico					
North Carolina	✓ ^o	✓	✓	✓ ^{pre, o}	
Pennsylvania					
Rhode Island					
Tennessee					
Virginia					
Wisconsin		✓ ^{pre, b}	✓ ^{pre}	✓ ^{pre}	
State Totals	7	9	3	7	2

Source: 18-State Survey of State TANF Application Processes

^{pre}: Policy was implemented prior to September 1996

^o: Policy is optional for local offices in State

nd: Application not denied for failure to comply with requirement

^a: Requirement for clients returning to TANF after a sanction.

^b: There are two assessments. One screening session/initial assessment is conducted by a Resource Specialist (RS) and another with a Financial Employment Planner (FEP).

- The most common type of requirement involves the completion of an employability assessment or screening. Nine States require completion of this requirement. These include all of the States listed as having a work-related requirement in the discussion of sample selection, except for Indiana. All of the States with this requirement, except Maine, will deny an application if the screening is not completed prior to eligibility determination.
- Attendance at an orientation session during the application process is required in six States and is a local option in North Carolina. All of the States with the requirement, except Minnesota, will deny an application if the applicant does not attend.
- Seven of the study States require applicants to complete a job search or a job search training workshop before an application can be approved. This includes all of the States listed in the discussion of the sample selection except Connecticut. Local offices in Florida and North Carolina have the option of imposing this requirement. Applicants can be denied for failure to complete the job search in all the States with the requirement, except for Indiana. All States with this requirement impose at least one of the other employment-related requirements.
- Only three States require applicants to register with the State Department of Employment Security prior to approval for TANF benefits. However, it should be mentioned that a number of States indicated employment registration is a requirement for enrolling in the Food Stamp Program. All three States with this requirement deny an application for non-compliance. Each of these States also imposes a number of the other employment-related requirements.
- Two study States listed other requirements. Local offices in Florida may require applicants to engage in employment-related activities that meet TANF work-requirement definitions prior to TANF benefit approval. Applicants in Illinois are required to complete any education or training activity that is written into their service plan before they may be certified for TANF (see Appendix Exhibit D.17).

Details on State policies regarding employment-related TANF application requirements are shown in Exhibits D.1 through D.17 in Appendix D. Highlights from these tables are described below.

Orientation Sessions

All States that require applicants to attend an orientation session require the parent or guardian in a single-parent household and both parents in a two-parent household to attend the session. San Diego County and Maine also require the caretaker adult in a child-only case to attend orientation before being approved for TANF (see Appendix Exhibit D.1). No States require applicants to attend an orientation session before filing an application. North Carolina allows local offices to decide if and when an applicant must attend (see Appendix Exhibit D.2). Five of the seven States that have requirements for attending orientation sessions exempt some types of clients, while two do not. Mississippi's requirement is limited to applicants returning after having been sanctioned. Three of the five States with exemptions use different criteria than is used to determine exemptions from work requirements (see Appendix Exhibit D.3).

Employability Assessments or Screenings

Eight of the nine States that have application requirements involving employability assessments or screenings require the parent or guardian in single-parent households and both parents in two-parent households to complete an assessment, except Illinois, which only requires one parent to do so. Nevada is the only State that requires adults in child-only cases to complete an assessment or screening (see Appendix Exhibit D.4). No State requires these assessments to be completed prior to application filing. North Carolina and Georgia leave the timing up to local office discretion (see Appendix Exhibit D.5). Among the nine States that require assessments, four exempt certain clients, four have no exemption provisions, and one State, Florida, allows local offices to decide. Three of the four States that have exemptions utilize the same criteria used for exempting clients from work requirements (see Appendix Exhibit D.6).

Work Registration

As previously noted, work registration was the least common employment-related requirement among the study States. None of the three States with the requirement impose it on adults in child-only cases or require that it be undertaken prior to filing an application (see Appendix Exhibits D.7 and D.8). All States exempt some clients and use exemptions that differ from their work requirement exemptions (see Appendix Exhibit D.9).

Applicant Job Search

Four of the seven States that require applicants to engage in a job search use an individualized assessment to determine whether applicants must fulfill the requirement through job search, job search training or both. Indiana requires an individual job search and North Carolina and Florida let local offices decide (see Appendix Exhibit D.10). Georgia and Nevada are the only States requiring adults in child-only cases to conduct applicant job search. Four States with the requirement require both parents in a two-parent household to participate in applicant job search. Both North Carolina and Florida allow local offices to set this requirement (see Appendix Exhibit D.11). Five States require the job search requirement to be completed after application filing but before approval. North Carolina and Wisconsin allow local offices to determine when the requirement must be completed (see Appendix Exhibit D.12).

All of the States with this requirement, except North Carolina and Florida, provide some exemptions. Florida does not specify exemptions but leaves the decision to local office discretion. Three States use the same exemptions as those used for ongoing TANF work requirements, while two use different exemptions (see Appendix Exhibit D.13). Most States that use applicant job search do not have a specific requirement for minimal number of hours or contacts. However, eligibility workers may impose requirements based on individualized assessments or plans. Indiana and Nevada are the exceptions and they both require 10 contacts per week, though local offices have the flexibility to reduce this in Nevada (see Appendix Exhibit D.14). Georgia, Indiana, and Nevada require applicants to submit names of job contacts, while the other States with job search requirements either leave the decision to local office discretion or have no specific policy (see Appendix Exhibit D.15). None of the States with a job search requirement have set minimal requirements for attendance at job search training sessions or classes (see Appendix Exhibit D.16).

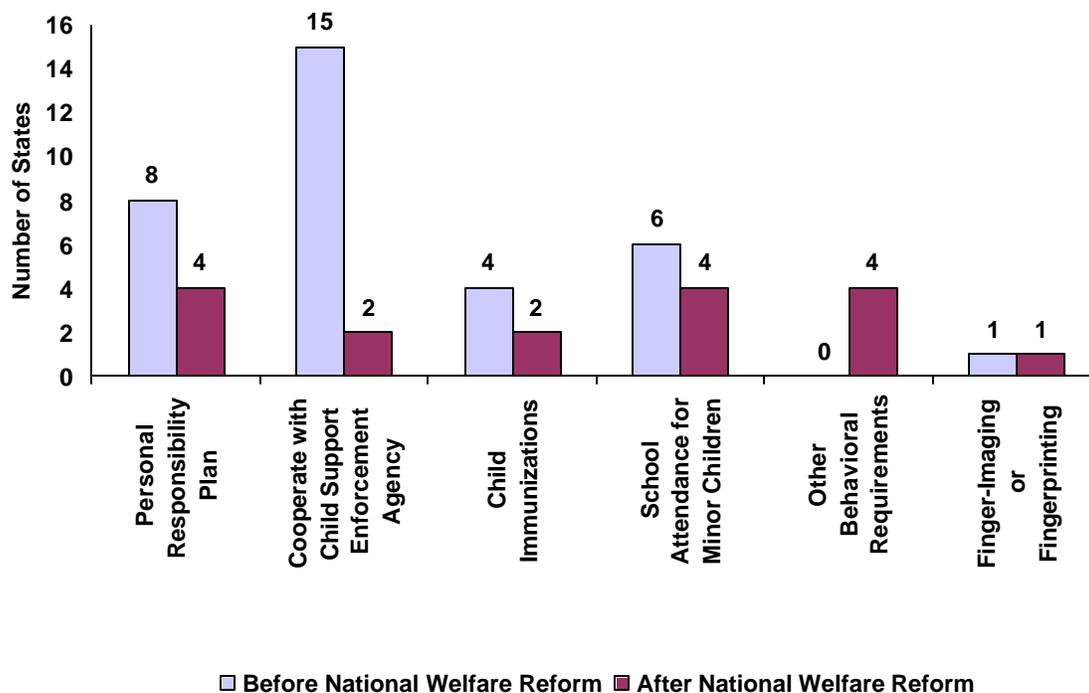
Non-Employment-Related Application Requirements

Exhibit 2.3 shows the number of study States implementing non-employment-related TANF application requirements before and after the implementation of national welfare reform. The application requirement that was most commonly implemented prior to welfare reform was cooperation with child support enforcement. All but 1 of the 18 States have implemented a requirement to cooperate with child support efforts during the application process. Fifteen of the 17 States with this requirement imposed it prior to national welfare reform. Fewer States have implemented policies requiring completion of a personal responsibility plan, proof of child immunization, or school attendance. More States implemented these policies prior to national welfare reform than after. Although after the passage of PRWORA States increased the number of non-employment-related application requirements, many of the 18 study States were clearly moving in this direction prior to the change in Federal law.

A State-by-State listing of non-employment requirements is displayed in Exhibit 2.4 along with information on whether failure to complete the requirement results in an application denial, whether the requirement predates national welfare reform, and whether the policy is mandatory or optional for local offices. Requirements that do not result in an application denial can result in cases being opened with reduced benefits. The key findings regarding the imposition of non-employment-related TANF application requirements are:

- All 18 States selected to participate in the State Survey of Application Policies impose some type of non-employment-related TANF application behavioral requirement.
- Cooperation with the child support enforcement agency is the most common type of application requirement. Minnesota is the only State that does not require cooperation with the child support enforcement agency during the application process. Nevada, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island all require cooperation, however, applicants who do not cooperate will not have their application denied.
- The second most common type of requirement involves completing a personal responsibility plan. Two-thirds of the States surveyed require that applicants complete these plans. As indicated, 8 of the 12 States that require these plans initially imposed the requirement before the implementation of national welfare reform in October 1996. Three of the States do not deny an otherwise eligible application if the plan is not completed during the application process.

Exhibit 2.3**Timing of Implementation of Non-Employment Related TANF Application Behavioral Requirements (in 18 Selected States)**



- Ten of the 18 States surveyed have a requirement of satisfactory school attendance for children. Half of them do not deny benefits if proof is not shown before eligibility determination. In Virginia local offices have the option of requiring applicants to show proof of school attendance.
- Six States require TANF applicants to show proof of up-to-date childhood immunizations. Five of these States do not deny the application if proof is not provided. Four of these States had the requirement in place prior to the implementation of national welfare reform.
- Behavioral requirements other than those listed are imposed in four States, while finger-imaging (electronic finger-printing) or finger-printing is only required in San Diego County and Connecticut. North Carolina and Illinois grant local offices the option of determining whether to implement other behavioral requirements.

Appendix Exhibits D.18 through D.29 provide details on State non-employment-related TANF application requirements. Key findings from these tables are described below.

Personal Responsibility Plan

The personal responsibility plan is the second most common nonemployment-related TANF application requirement among the 18 study States, and it is the one requirement applied to the

Exhibit 2.4

Non-Employment Related TANF Application Requirements (in 18 Selected States)

State	Requirements					
	Personal Responsibility Plan	Cooperate with Child Support Enforcement Agency	Child Immunizations	School Attendance for Minor Children	Other Behavioral Requirements	Finger Imaging or Printing
California (San Diego County)	✓	✓ ^{pre, a}	✓ nd	✓ nd		✓
Connecticut	✓ ^{pre}	✓ ^{pre}				✓ ^{pre}
Florida		✓ ^{pre}	✓ nd	✓ nd		
Georgia	✓	✓	✓ ^{pre}	✓ ^b	✓ nd	
Illinois	✓	✓ ^{pre}			✓ ^o	
Indiana	✓ ^{pre, nd}	✓ ^{pre}	✓ ^{pre, nd}	✓ ^{pre, nd}	✓ nd	
Maine	✓ ^{pre, nd}	✓ ^{pre, c}				
Minnesota				✓ ^{pre}		
Mississippi	✓ ^{pre}	✓ ^{pre}	✓ ^{pre, nd, c}	✓ ^{pre, nd, e}		
Nevada		✓ ^{pre, nd}		✓		
New Jersey	✓ ^{pre}	✓ ^{pre}				
New Mexico		✓ ^{pre, nd}				
North Carolina	✓ ^{pre}	✓ ^{pre}			✓ ^o	
Pennsylvania	✓ nd	✓ nd				
Rhode Island		✓ ^{pre, nd}				
Tennessee	✓ ^{pre}	✓ ^{pre}	✓ ^{pre, nd}	✓ ^{pre, nd}		
Virginia		✓ ^{pre}		✓ ^{pre, o, f}		
Wisconsin	✓ ^{pre, g}	✓ ^{pre}		✓ ^{pre}		
State Totals	12	17	6	10	4	2

Source: 18-State Survey of State TANF Application Processes

^o: Policy is optional for local offices in State

^{pre}: Policy was implemented prior to October 1996

nd: Application not denied for failure to comply with requirement

^a: Applicant is denied if they refuse to sign over parental rights to the State. If applicant refuses to identify the non-custodial parent without good cause, they receive a 25% sanction

^b: Only in some cases when the child has dropped out of school in the past or if there is another reason to doubt the parent's report.

^c: Applicants must assign rights to support or family is ineligible. Individual must also agree to cooperate and sign an "affirmation of paternity" indicating the father if paternity is not established or the grant is reduced by the need of the individual or 25 percent, whichever is greater.

^d: Parents must provide proof if the worker has doubts or the parents indicate that children in the household are not immunized.

^e: Parents must provide proof if the worker questions the parent's report that the children are in school.

^f: Must provide proof if the child was previously enrolled in TANF and removed from the grant for truancy.

^g: Wisconsin has two different agreements—the W2 Participation Agreement and the Employability Plan.

broadest group of applicants. Among the 12 States that require applicants to sign a personal responsibility plan, all but Illinois require one parent or guardian in a single-parent household and both parents in a two-parent household to sign the plan. Illinois only requires one parent or guardian to sign the plan (see Appendix Exhibit D.18). In seven of the States with a requirement to complete a personal responsibility plan, the plan is completed at the same meeting at which the application is filed. Five States require the plan to be completed after filing but before approval, while New Jersey leaves it up to the local offices to decide when the plan must be completed (see Appendix Exhibit D.19).

Among the States requiring a personal responsibility plan, only Connecticut exempts some applicants from the requirement. Connecticut uses the same exemptions applied for the State work requirement (see Appendix Exhibit D.20). All States include both employment and non-employment related requirements in their personal responsibility plans. Nine of the 12 States can list child support enforcement requirements in their plans and seven of them can list requirements to participate in parenting education. Half of the States with the requirement can list ensuring school attendance of minor children. Child immunization requirements are less frequently listed in personal responsibility plans (see Appendix Exhibit D.21). Additional requirements that may be included in personal responsibility plans are listed in Appendix Exhibit D.22. Six of the 12 include requirements related to substance abuse treatment or removal of other barriers to work.

Cooperation With Child Support Enforcement Agency

In 16 of the 17 States that require applicants to cooperate with the child support enforcement agency, applicants must sign a form agreeing to cooperate. The one exception is Illinois, which will only deny assistance to applicants who indicate that they do not intend to cooperate with the child support enforcement agency. In addition to requiring signed forms, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Wisconsin also require applicants to meet with a child support enforcement worker before the application can be approved. San Diego County can require cooperation beyond signing a form, such as providing information on the non-custodial parent or requiring an appointment with the child support enforcement agency (see Appendix Exhibit D.23). New Jersey and Maine are the only States that report requiring applicants to demonstrate cooperation before an application can be considered filed. In Connecticut and New Mexico the application form includes a statement of cooperation and signing the form meets the requirement. North Carolina allows local offices to determine when cooperation must be demonstrated (see Appendix Exhibit D.24).

Childhood Immunizations

All six of the States requiring TANF applicants to submit proof of childhood immunization require that the proof be submitted after the application is filed but before it can be approved (see Appendix Exhibit D.25).

Proof of School Enrollment

Nine of the ten States that require proof of school attendance require that it be submitted after the application has been filed but before it can be approved. In San Diego County, the verification forms are sent out to the schools on the sixth of each month and must be returned within 10 days. If this coincides with the time the application is pending, the case may be opened with a reduced grant (see

Appendix Exhibit D.26). Most of the States that require proof of school attendance set an upper age limit. Virginia limits the policy to children with a history of truancy and Tennessee requires all children in the household without a high school diploma to show proof of attendance. Most upper age limits are in the 16-18 year range, but the Nevada requirement is limited to children between age 7 and 11 (see Appendix Exhibit D.27).

Other Behavioral Requirements

There are a variety of other behavioral requirements that States impose on TANF applicants. For example, Illinois and North Carolina refer some clients for substance abuse treatment prior to approval. Georgia requires pregnant household members to receive prenatal care or at least to be scheduled for an appointment. Illinois also requires some applicants to obtain health-related services. Indiana requires applicants to raise children in a safe and secure home and to not use illegal substances (see Appendix Exhibit D.28).

Finger-Imaging or Fingerprinting

San Diego County and Connecticut are the only agencies surveyed that require fingerprinting or finger-imaging. Both require that this activity be completed before approval (see Appendix Exhibit D.29).

Benefit Diversion Policies

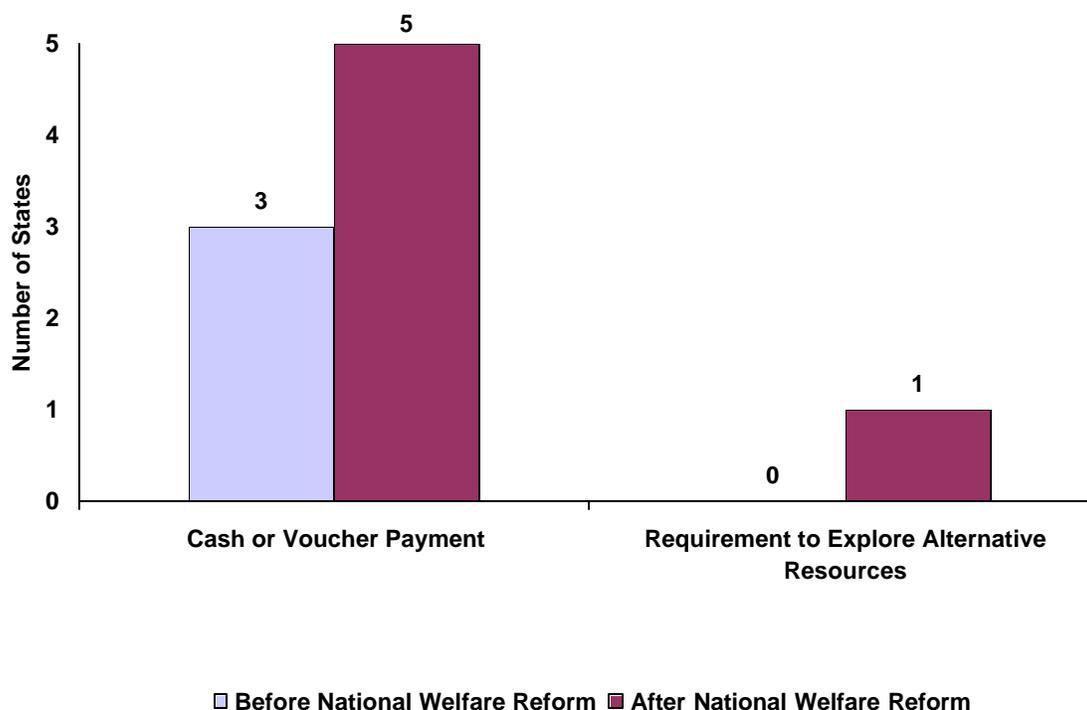
The two policies classified as benefit diversion in this study are lump sum cash payments or vouchers and a requirement to explore alternative resources, such as assistance from community agencies. Cash or vouchers are offered to applicants as an alternative to becoming recipients of regular monthly TANF cash assistance. States were also asked whether they require applicants to attempt to obtain other forms of assistance from community-based agencies before being approved for TANF. This is a narrow definition of an alternative assistance requirement designed to limit affirmative answers to offices where applicants are required to seek assistance rather than just encouraged to do so.¹

Exhibit 2.5 shows the number of States that implemented diversion policies before and after the implementation of national welfare reform. Three of the eight States that offer applicants cash or vouchers as an alternative to becoming a cash assistance recipient indicated that they implemented these policies prior to the implementation of national welfare reform. The one State indicating that it requires applicants to explore alternative resources implemented the policies after the implementation of national welfare reform.

Exhibit 2.6 provides a list of States and whether they have implemented a cash or voucher diversion payment or whether they require clients to explore alternative resources. The table also shows what States implemented these policies prior to national welfare reform. The key findings regarding diversion are:

¹ Maloy et. al. 1998 included States with less formalized procedures for encouraging the use of alternative resources in their count of States with these policies.

Exhibit 2.5**Timing of Implementation of State TANF Diversion Policies (in 18 Selected States)**



-
- Requirements to explore alternative resources before completing the application process are rare among the States studied. Wisconsin is the only State that requires applicants to explore alternative resources before receiving TANF.
 - Among the eight States that offer cash or voucher payments to applicants who agree not to become TANF recipients, not one also require applicants to explore alternative resources before being approved for TANF.
 - Two of the ten States (New Mexico and Virginia) that use one of the two TANF diversion policies do not impose any of the employment-related requirements.

Detailed information about State diversion policies is included in Exhibits D.30 through D.33 in Appendix D.

Requirement to Explore Alternative Resources

The State that requires applicants to explore alternative resources such as aid from community-based organizations allows applicants to file a TANF application before exploring these resources (see Appendix Exhibit D.30). The State does not recommend specific types of resources or referrals in its policies. The State allows local offices to decide whether or not to require applicants to verify that they sought assistance (see Appendix Exhibit D.31).

Exhibit 2.6**State TANF Diversion Policies (in 18 Selected States)**

State	Cash or Voucher Payment	Requirement to Explore Alternative Resources
California (San Diego County)	✓	
Connecticut	✓	
Florida	✓	
Georgia		
Illinois		
Indiana		
Maine	✓ ^{pre}	
Minnesota	✓	
Mississippi		
Nevada		
New Jersey		
New Mexico	✓	
North Carolina	✓ ^{pre}	
Pennsylvania		
Rhode Island		
Tennessee		
Virginia	✓ ^{pre}	
Wisconsin		✓
State Totals	8	1

Source: 18-State Survey of State TANF Application Processes

°: Policy is optional for local offices in State

^{pre}: Policy was implemented prior to October 1996

Cash Payments or Vouchers in Lieu of TANF Cash Assistance

Seven of the eight States that have diversion requirements specify applicant eligibility requirements within State policy. North Carolina gives caseworkers discretion in determining eligibility. Five of the eight States require that all applicants be offered diversion payments. Three States do not have a period of TANF ineligibility for applicants who receive a cash payment or voucher. Connecticut requires applicants who accept diversion payments to wait three months before applying for TANF, while in New Mexico the wait is 12 months. The remaining three States base the period of ineligibility on the amount of the cash payment or voucher. None of the States in the survey have county-funded diversion programs (see Appendix Exhibit D.32).

Minnesota is the only one of the States surveyed in which the income eligibility limit for diversion payments is higher than the limit for TANF. The other seven States that have diversion policies have the same income limit for both TANF and diversion benefits. States that offer diversion payments use a variety of criteria. The criteria typically include provisions limiting diversion to applicants who can use the payments to maintain or obtain employment (see Appendix Exhibit D.33).

The next chapter explores in further detail application information requirements and other procedures that have been implemented by States under welfare reform.

Chapter Three:

Applicant Information Requirements and Office Operations

A central goal of the TANF application process is to collect and verify program-relevant information from applicants. This chapter reviews the type and content of forms States provide applicants to apply for TANF, the verification requirements that must be completed before approval for TANF, and policies involving office hours, access to applications by mail, and requirements for staffing by bilingual staff. The major findings that emerge from an examination of TANF forms and office operations include:

- Changes in applicant information requirements broadly reflect application policy changes under welfare reform, with additional items on application forms focusing on employment and personal and parental responsibility.
- Some States have introduced pre-application screening forms focused on employability and employment issues, and on other social service or health needs.
- Although many States have added information and verification items tied to personal and parental responsibility, most had done so before national welfare reform in 1996.
- Although Federal TANF regulations do not specify timeliness standards for processing applications, most States have maintained the standards used for the AFDC Program.

This chapter describes detailed survey findings covering application forms and office operations, and any changes that may have followed national welfare reform.

Use of Pre-Application Screening Forms

States may use forms to gather information from individuals before they complete a formal application for several programs, including TANF. These forms are important because they may help determine which programs a potential applicant may qualify for and they may be used to send an initial message to the applicant about program requirements and goals. Screening forms may also be a potential tool for diverting applicants from TANF. The State policy survey was used to find out whether States are using these forms, the purpose of such forms, and whether the use has increased since the implementation of TANF.

State respondents were asked whether State policy requires “individuals applying for TANF to complete any other forms or electronic screens as part of an intake, assessment or pre-application screening before receiving the TANF application form.”

Five of the 18 States selected for the Survey of State TANF Application Processes use a pre-application intake, screening, or assessment form (see Exhibit 3.1). Reported reasons for pre-application screening include:

Exhibit 3.1**States Using Pre-Application Intake, Screening or Assessment Forms (in 18 Selected States, n=5)**

	Purpose of Form	Topics Covered
California (San Diego County)	Screen for self-identified needs and identify barriers such as domestic violence or lack of transportation	Psychological well-being; domestic violence or abuse; medical, food assistance, and financial needs
Georgia	Assess applicant's employability; identify barriers to employment and self-sufficiency ^{pre}	Work history and experience; education background; substance abuse; available transportation; child care needs; physical limitations
Indiana	Gather basic demographic information; perform various checks and clearances; initiate application tracking ^{pre}	Work history and experience; education background
Nevada	Assess applicant's employability; identify barriers to employment and self-sufficiency	Work history and experience; education background; psychological well-being; domestic violence or abuse; substance abuse
Rhode Island	Determine probable eligibility for benefits; direct applicant to appropriate programs ^{pre}	Work history and experience; income and resources; living situation; family composition

Source: 18-State Survey of State TANF Application Processes

^{pre}: Policy implemented before October 1996

- **Initiate an application into the data systems.** Indiana uses a pre-screening form as an intake process to initiate an application in the system by gathering basic demographic information. Workers also run various checks through the computer system to verify whether the applicant is already receiving benefits or has received benefits in the past.
- **Inform potential applicants about eligibility for benefits.** Rhode Island determines likely eligibility for benefits and is able to direct applicants to the appropriate benefit programs.
- **Assess employment history and potential barriers to self-sufficiency.** Georgia and Nevada use screening forms to assess an applicant's employability, previous training, or interest area. The assessment also provides an opportunity to identify potential barriers to employment and self-sufficiency. San Diego County uses a screening process to assess applicant needs, as well as to identify potential barriers, such as transportation or domestic violence.

Although the intent of prescreening forms varies across States, most States request similar information. Applicants' work history and experience assist workers in assigning work activities, determining potential eligibility, or assessing barriers. States may also cover information related to potential domestic violence, substance abuse, mental health problems, transportation issues, or family composition. The forms that are being used clearly put a strong emphasis on work. San Diego County's form is the only one that does not collect work history and experience, though it does have a

strong focus on barriers to employment. Only two, San Diego County and Nevada, introduced pre-application screening forms after the implementation of national welfare reform.

Changes in Application Forms

There are a number of reasons why the extensive changes in cash assistance programs have led to redesigned program application forms. Prior to welfare reform, AFDC applications were usually combined with applications for food stamps and always combined with Medicaid, as AFDC recipients were categorically eligible for Medicaid. The implementation of PRWORA changed the relationship of welfare to other benefit programs by delinking TANF eligibility from Medicaid eligibility and allowing States increased flexibility in program design. The greater emphasis on employment has also led to an increased focus on childcare and other supportive service needs. States may use the application to collect information for determining eligibility for other programs. States may also make changes to the type of information collected to find out more about the employability of applicants. On the other hand, there is concern that longer applications discourage individuals from seeking needed benefits. This may limit the willingness of States to add items to their applications. The State Survey of Application Policies and Procedures asked respondents what other programs are covered on the TANF applications and about changes that have been made in the application forms since October 1996.

- **Joint applications.** The 18 States surveyed have made limited changes in the programs covered by their application (see Exhibit 3.2). With the exception of Wisconsin, all States continue to coordinate the TANF application with the Food Stamp Program and Medicaid. Wisconsin is unable to do so because in many local offices private contractors play a large role in the TANF application process and Federal law requires public employees to accept food stamp and Medicaid applications. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, Connecticut and Georgia removed childcare subsidy programs from their cash assistance applications. Only Wisconsin has added subsidized childcare to the list of programs that can be applied for along with TANF.

Nine of the 18 study States use their applications for other programs, with four of these States adding other benefit programs since the start of national welfare reform (Florida, Maine, Rhode Island, and Wisconsin). Other programs covered include General Assistance, Refugee Assistance, and Emergency Assistance. Among the States adding programs since welfare reform, two of the four have added programs directly related to welfare reform. Maine has added its Parents as Scholars Program, a State-funded program that allows recipients to pursue a college education while collecting a cash grant. Wisconsin has added its Job Access Loans Program, which provides short-term, no interest loans to meet emergency needs related to obtaining or retaining employment.

- **Questions about applicants' employability and life situation.** Respondents to the survey of TANF application policies were asked if their application forms currently include any questions on topics related to applicants' employability and life situation that may affect their ability to work or become self-sufficient.

Exhibit 3.2**Other Programs Included on State TANF and AFDC Applications (in 18 Selected States)**

State	Programs Applicant Can Apply for with TANF Application Form				Programs Included on AFDC Application Form			
	Food Stamps	Medicaid	Child Care	Other	Food Stamps	Medicaid	Child Care	Other
California (San Diego County)	✓	✓			✓	✓		
Connecticut	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Florida	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		
Georgia	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	
Illinois	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓
Indiana	✓	✓			✓	✓		
Maine	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		
Minnesota	✓	✓			✓	✓		✓
Mississippi	✓	✓			✓	✓		
Nevada	✓	✓			✓	✓		
New Jersey	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓
New Mexico	✓	✓			✓	✓		
North Carolina	✓	✓			✓	✓		
Pennsylvania	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓
Rhode Island	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		
Tennessee	✓	✓			✓	✓		
Virginia	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓
Wisconsin			✓	✓	✓	✓		
State Totals	17	17	1	9	18	18	2	6

Source: 18-State Survey of State TANF Application Processes

Ten of the 18 study States reported asking at least one question about employability. Half of the 18 States report having questions related to work history and half report having questions related to education on State TANF application forms. However, only Indiana added both work history and education items after October 1996, while North Carolina is the only other State that added questions regarding education. The States that previously included these questions continue to do so. This may represent an early focus on employability in these States or the questions may have been considered part of the basic demographic information already being collected for AFDC.

Four States (California (San Diego County), Minnesota, Nevada, and Pennsylvania) report having questions related to psychological well-being on their application form,

with Nevada being the only State adding this information after October 1996. An additional two and three States respectively have questions regarding domestic violence and substance abuse on their TANF application forms. Nevada is the only State adding both of these topics to the application form after October 1996. Most States do not appear to be using the application form to collect information on barriers to employment. States may be collecting this information elsewhere. As discussed earlier, some States are using pre-application screening forms to gather this type of information. Other States may be waiting until applicants get further into the process, or are determined eligible for benefits, before exploring issues of employability and barriers to employment.

- **Other items added to TANF applications.** States were also asked about whether they added items to their application form in the areas of income, resources or assets, living situations, or household characteristics. As shown in Exhibit 3.4, nine States reported adding new items to their applications after October 1996. Eight States added questions about household characteristics. Four States (Connecticut, Maine, Pennsylvania, and Virginia) request additional information regarding income and resources or assets. They cover topics such as earned income tax credits, TANF benefits received in other States, and balances in individual development accounts. Maine also added questions to determine applicants' expenses for housing costs. Exhibit 3.4 lists the states and their responses.

Most of the other questions added recently appear to have limited connection to welfare reform. However, there are two major exceptions. Four States have added questions asking whether there are any fleeing felons in the household. These questions are an attempt to address the PRWORA requirement making fleeing felons ineligible for benefits. New Jersey, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, and Virginia have added questions relating to the PRWORA option that allows the disqualification of recipients convicted of a drug felony.

Verification Requirements

To complete an application, TANF applicants have to verify a variety of circumstances, such as income, household composition, employment, shelter costs, and citizenship status, for example. Applicants usually have a set period of time to turn in required verification documents. Verification may involve having a form filled out, or may require the worker to contact directly the source of the information. Unless applicants are given an extension, the case is normally denied due to lack of information if all required verifications are not provided. The Survey of State TANF Policies requested information on items that need to be verified, which items routinely require third-party contact for verification purposes, and what happens when an applicant does not complete the verification requirements. Under AFDC, States were required to process applications within 45 days of the filing date.¹ PRWORA eliminated this requirement and allowed States to set different time periods. While there is no obvious reason that TANF implementation would change other State verification procedures, it is important to examine verification when analyzing the TANF application process.

¹ Some States adopted shorter application periods.

Exhibit 3.3

**TANF Application Form Items Related to Applicant Employability and Life Situation
(in 18 Selected States)**

Categories of Applicant Information Included on the TANF Application						
State	Work History	Education	Psychological Well-Being	Domestic Violence/ Abuse	Substance Abuse	Other
California (San Diego County)	✓ ^{pre}		✓ ^{pre}		✓ ^{pre}	
Connecticut	✓ ^{pre}	✓ ^{pre}				✓
Florida						
Georgia						
Illinois						
Indiana	✓	✓				
Maine						
Minnesota	✓ ^{pre}	✓ ^{pre}	✓ ^{pre}			
Mississippi						
Nevada	✓ ^{pre}	✓ ^{pre}	✓	✓	✓	
New Jersey	✓ ^{pre}	✓ ^{pre}				
New Mexico	✓ ^{pre}	✓ ^{pre}				
North Carolina		✓				
Pennsylvania	✓ ^{pre}	✓ ^{pre}	✓ ^{pre}	✓ ^{pre}	✓ ^{pre}	✓ ^{pre}
Rhode Island						
Tennessee						
Virginia						
Wisconsin	✓ ^{pre}	✓ ^{pre}				✓ ^{pre}
State Totals	9	9	4	2	3	3

Source: 18-State Survey of State TANF Application Processes

^{pre}: Information on topic was included on the application prior to October 1996

Exhibit 3.4**States Adding Questions to Their TANF Application Since September 1996
(in 18 Selected States, n=9)**

State	Information Category	New Information Requested
Connecticut	Living situation	Options of "homeless" and "other medical facility" were added
	Income	Fired from job within past 90 days
	Resources/assets	Trusts established after 8/11/93
Georgia	Household Characteristics	Visual/hearing impairment; SSN for all household members not on assistance; Fleeing felons; Probation/parole violators; Misrepresentation of residency; Felons; Pregnancy
Indiana	Household Characteristics	Additional information was requested regarding race and ethnicity to comply with Federal requirements
	Living situation	Residence in a subsidized housing unit
Maine	Household Characteristics	Allows for individuals to declare multi-ethnic/race
	Living situation	Residence in Indian Country
	Income	Receipt of Earned Income Tax Credit or Advanced Earned Income Tax Credit, including date of receipt and amount
	Living expenses/budget	Residence in public housing; Receipt of rent subsidy; Receipt of child care subsidy;
Minnesota	Household Characteristics	Race/ethnicity; Length of time of residence in State; Intention to remain resident of State
New Jersey	Household Characteristics	Fleeing felons; Probation/parole violators; Misrepresentation of residency; Previous Fraud in means-tested programs; Conviction of drug-related felony
New Mexico	Household Characteristics	Declaration of US citizenship; Fleeing felons; Probation/parole violators; Conviction of drug-related felony
Pennsylvania	Income	TANF benefits received in other States
	Household Characteristics	Conviction of felony for welfare fraud or controlled substance
Virginia	Household Characteristics	Conviction of drug-related felony since 8/22/96; Fleeing felons; Probation/parole violators
	Resources/assets	Individual development accounts

Source: 18-State Survey of State TANF Application Processes

- **Verification Requirements.** Exhibit 3.5 shows the type of household circumstances that TANF applicants have to verify before an application can be approved. Income verification is required by all 18 States, citizenship status by 17 States, and verification of Social Security numbers and household composition are required by 16 States. Twelve States require verification for a loss of employment. Only a few States implemented new verification requirements after October 1996. The most common new requirements are verification for minor children enrolled in school and child immunizations. However, only two States report implementing the requirement after national welfare reform. Many States had already imposed these requirements prior to TANF under State AFDC waivers (Wiseman 1996).
- **Third-Party Verification.** Requiring third-party verifications poses a potential barrier to completing the application process, as applications may be delayed while waiting for a contact to provide necessary information. As shown in Exhibit 3.6, only a few of the 18 States require any third-party verification. Three of the 18 States requiring verification for income require third-party documentation, and three of the 12 States requiring verification for loss of employment require third-party documentation. None of these requirements were implemented after October 1996.
- **Failure to Submit Required Verifications.** All 18 States specified policies for local offices to implement when handling TANF applicants who do not meet the deadlines for submission of verification documents (Exhibit 3.7). Of the 18 States, nine reported a flexible policy that allows caseworkers to extend the processing deadline for TANF applicants to return the needed verification documents. Among the four States that indicated that their policy fit under the “other” category, all but Wisconsin indicated that State policy requires workers to deny applications that do not submit verifications in time, though in practice there are circumstances where extensions are made. Wisconsin’s policy states that if an applicant has made a “reasonable effort” and cannot obtain required information, the agency must use the available information to process the case.
- **Application Processing Deadline.** States were asked whether they had changed the length of time applicants have to submit TANF verification documents. Fifteen States maintained their AFDC deadlines. Among the three States that made changes, New Mexico reduced the amount of time for processing an application and submitting verifications from 45 to 30 days. Wisconsin reduced the amount of time to submit verification from 10 days to 7 days after the eligibility interview. Pennsylvania changed the deadline from 15 days after the eligibility interview to within 30 days of filing an application.

A major finding is that States made limited changes in verification requirements. Moreover, a number of the welfare-reform related requirements that States do impose predate PRWORA.

Exhibit 3.5

Types of Household Circumstances That TANF Applicants Must Verify Prior to Approval (in 18 Selected States)

State	Verifications									
	Income	SSN/Proof of Application for SSN	Household Composition	Loss of Employment	Shelter Costs	Child Care Costs	Citizenship Status	Minor Children Enrolled in School	Child Immunizations	Other
California (San Diego County)	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	
Connecticut	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓			
Florida	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓ ^{post}	✓ ^{post}	✓
Georgia	✓	✓				✓		✓	✓	
Illinois	✓	✓	✓				✓			✓
Indiana	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	
Maine	✓			✓			✓			
Minnesota	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		
Mississippi	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
Nevada	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓ ^{post}	✓ ^{post}	
New Jersey	✓	✓	✓	✓ ^a	✓	✓	✓			
New Mexico	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
North Carolina	✓	✓	✓				✓			
Pennsylvania	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓ ^{post}			
Rhode Island	✓	✓	✓				✓			✓ ^{post}
Tennessee	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Virginia	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		
Wisconsin	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓		✓
State Totals	18	16	16	12	5	6	17	10	7	6

Source: 18-State Survey of State TANF Application Processes

^{post}: Policy was implemented after September 1996

^a: Only required if worker suspects applicant voluntarily quit their job.

Exhibit 3.6

Types of Household Circumstances That Must be Verified by Third Parties Before TANF Applicants May be Approved for TANF (in 18 Selected States)

State	Third-Party Verifications								
	Income	Household Composition	Loss of Employment	Shelter Costs	Child Care Costs	Citizenship Status	Minor Children Enrolled in School	Child Immunizations	None
California (San Diego County)									✓
Connecticut									✓
Florida									✓
Georgia									✓
Illinois									✓
Indiana	✓		✓				✓		
Maine	✓		✓			✓			
Minnesota									✓
Mississippi									✓
Nevada									✓
New Jersey	✓		✓				✓		
New Mexico									✓
North Carolina		✓							
Pennsylvania									✓
Rhode Island									✓
Tennessee									✓
Virginia									✓
Wisconsin									✓
State Totals	3	1	3	0	0	1	2	0	14

Source: 18-State Survey of State TANF Application Processes

^{post}: Policy was implemented after September 1996

Exhibit 3.7

Usual State Policy For Dealing With TANF Applications When Verification Submission Deadlines are Not Met (in 18 Selected States)

State	Requires That TANF Application be Denied	Policy is Flexible Allowing Caseworkers to Extend Deadline	Local Office Discretion	Other
California (San Diego County)				✓
Connecticut		✓		
Florida		✓		
Georgia		✓		
Illinois	✓			
Indiana				✓
Maine				✓
Minnesota		✓		
Mississippi		✓		
Nevada	✓			
New Jersey		✓		
New Mexico		✓		
North Carolina		✓		
Pennsylvania	✓			
Rhode Island	✓			
Tennessee		✓		
Virginia	✓ ^a			
Wisconsin				✓
State Totals	5	9	0	4

Source: 18-State Survey of State TANF Application Processes

^a. If needed information is provided after denial but within the 45-day processing period, the application is re-pended using the original application date and application is approved.

State-Level Policies for Local Office Operations

The 18-State survey also examined selected State policies for local office operations. The areas that were examined all involve issues of program access. State policies in this area are shown in Exhibit 3.8.

- **Extended office hours for the evenings, mornings, or weekends.** For employed TANF applicants, taking time off to apply for benefits or to attend an eligibility interview or other application activities poses a potential barrier to completing the process. One response to this is to require or allow local offices to extend office hours and/or days. However, according to the State policy survey, only New Mexico among the 18 study States requires local offices to extend morning and evening hours. Even in New Mexico the policy does not specify the length of extended hours and instead requires that they be set according to county needs. States may be reluctant to specify such requirements because of budgetary limitations or staffing concerns.
- **Allowing access to applications by mail.** Making TANF applications accessible by mail provides easier access to the forms, especially for populations affected by hardships or who live a great distance from the public assistance office. Of the 18 States included in the survey, 15 required local offices to mail applications to anyone who requests one. The three States without a requirement to mail an application are California (San Diego County), North Carolina, and Wisconsin. All three States are county-administered and are more likely than other States to leave such decisions to county offices.
- **Provisions for bilingual staff for non-English or limited English speakers.** With large numbers of non-English-speaking populations in the United States, States may require that bilingual workers or translators be located at offices where a large number of non- or limited English-speaking individuals apply for assistance. One-third of the States included in the 18-State survey have implemented this requirement at the State level.

Appeals Procedures

Under AFDC, States had provisions for applicants to question or protest eligibility findings through a formal appeals process. The 18-State survey collected information on whether an appeals process still exists in the States under TANF and whether it has changed since October 1996. As shown in Exhibit 3.9, all 18 States continue to have an appeals process, and 17 States have not altered their designs since they were implemented under AFDC. Wisconsin is the only State that reported changing their formal appeals process for denied TANF applicants after October 1996. Wisconsin has moved from a formal “Fair Hearing” process involving both sides presenting evidence to an administrative judge to a “Fact Finding” process in which an uninvolved supervisor determines whether policy was correctly applied after interviewing client, worker, and supervisor. Individuals are allowed to request an administrative review from the State if they are dissatisfied with the results of the “Fact Finding.”

Exhibit 3.8**State-Level Policies For Local Office Operations
(Among 18 Selected States with Requirements)**

State	Extended Hours or Weekends to Accept TANF Applications	Requirement to Mail a TANF Application to Anyone Who Requests One	Require That Bilingual Workers or Translators be Located at Offices Where a Large Number of Non- or Limited English Speaking Individuals Apply for Assistance
California (San Diego County)	Local decision		
Connecticut	Local decision	✓	
Florida	Local decision	✓	
Georgia	Local decision	✓	
Illinois	Local decision	✓	
Indiana	Local decision	✓	
Maine	Local decision	✓	
Minnesota	Local decision	✓	
Mississippi	Local decision	✓	
Nevada	Local decision	✓	✓
New Jersey	Local decision	✓	✓
New Mexico	All offices remain open during noon hour; Some offices open 7:30am, and/or close at 5:30 or 6:00pm, depending on county needs.	✓	✓
North Carolina	Local decision		
Pennsylvania	Local decision	✓	
Rhode Island	Local decision	✓	✓
Tennessee	Local decision	✓	✓
Virginia	Local decision	✓	
Wisconsin	Local decision		✓

Source: 18-State Survey of State TANF Application Processes

Exhibit 3.9**Whether or Not States Have a Policy or An Applicant Appeals Process for Denied TANF Applicants and Whether it was Changed After September 1996 (in 18 Selected States)**

State	State Has a Formal Appeals Process for Denied TANF Applicants	Process Was Changed After September 1996
California (San Diego County)	✓	
Connecticut	✓	
Florida	✓	
Georgia	✓	
Illinois	✓	
Indiana	✓	
Maine	✓	
Minnesota	✓	
Mississippi	✓	
Nevada	✓	
New Jersey	✓	
New Mexico	✓	
North Carolina	✓	
Pennsylvania	✓	
Rhode Island	✓	
Tennessee	✓	
Virginia	✓	
Wisconsin	✓	✓
State Totals	18	1

Source: 18-State Survey of State TANF Application Processes

Chapter Four:

Local Office TANF Application Practices

This chapter examines TANF application practices in 11 local offices. During interviews for the State-level policy survey, State officials were asked to identify informants in one of the larger offices in the State. Interviews were generally conducted with a supervisor and a caseworker in each of the selected offices. A model of the application process was developed for each office that includes the steps applicants must complete to become certified for TANF. Included here is a discussion of the process in each office, including an overview of the State and its requirements, a description of the application process to accompany the model, and a discussion of staff perceptions of how the process has changed since the implementation of national welfare reform.

This chapter focuses on local office implementation and provides some insight into how the TANF application process has changed in selected large welfare local offices in 11 States. We found some differences in State-reported policies and procedures and those implemented locally. For example, some local offices have additional applicant requirements in place, while other offices do not report having all the requirements discussed by State-level management. These differences are noted throughout the chapter. Additionally, the perceptions of change that are described are exclusively those of staff respondents and may differ from the perceptions of applicants and State administrators.

The following major findings emerge from the local office interviews:

- Welfare reform has changed the application process in most of the 11 local offices in the study. Those offices have added specific activities or steps in the application process, including, for example, meetings with additional staff or other agencies, including child support enforcement staff and employment service providers.
- Most offices have also increased the amount and types of information exchanged between applicants and agencies. For example, in many offices intake workers are now responsible for providing applicants with more extensive information about work and other program requirements.
- Staff from most of the sample offices did not feel that changes made in the application process have had much effect on the willingness of individuals to apply or to complete the application process. General policy changes and increased employment opportunities outside of TANF were cited as more likely to influence application decisions. An important exception is the Dane County, Wisconsin office, in which informants felt that application policies have affected the decision to apply for TANF.
- Unique among the local offices included in the study is Dane County, Wisconsin. There, applicants who meet financial eligibility criteria may still be denied cash assistance if they are judged to be “job-ready.”

The offices described in this chapter are arranged by whether they include employment-related requirements and the offer of diversion payments as part of the TANF application process. The first offices discussed are those that do not have employment-related application requirements or offer diversion payments, the second group are those with diversion payments only, the third group are

those with only employment-related application requirements, and the final group includes those with both employment-related application requirements and diversion payments.

States Without Employment-Related Application Requirements or Diversion Payments

The four States without employment-related application requirements or diversion included in the local office study sample are Mississippi, Tennessee, Pennsylvania, and Indiana (applicant job search at local office discretion).

1. Hinds County, Mississippi

Overview

Hinds County is the largest county in Mississippi and includes Jackson, the State's largest city. According to the State policy survey conducted for this study, Mississippi requires applicants to complete an orientation before approval, but only if they are returning to TANF after a sanction. Mississippi also requires completion of a personal responsibility plan, cooperation with the child support enforcement agency, and requires proof of child immunizations and school attendance, if a worker has a reason to suspect these are issues.

The Application Process

Exhibit 4.1 shows the application process for TANF applicants who are not returning to TANF after a sanction. Applications are officially filed after applicants return the signed first page of the application to the clerical worker at the reception desk. The key addition since the passage of welfare reform is that applicants must indicate whether anyone in the household has been convicted of a drug felony since 1996. The local office respondent indicated that the application interview is usually scheduled for three to five days after the filing of the application.

During the application interview, applicants are required to assign child support rights to the State, complete and sign a personal responsibility contract, and indicate that they either do not have a substance abuse problem or agree to seek treatment for a problem. The latter requirement was not mentioned in the State policy survey. The first two requirements predate national welfare reform. The local supervisor who was interviewed did not indicate that it is a routine requirement for applicants to provide proof of childhood immunization and school attendance. This is consistent with the State description of these requirements.

Once the application interview is completed, the remaining requirement is for applicants to submit all remaining verifications within 30 days of filing an application.

Staff Perception of Change

The office informant indicated that the main change in the process is that the eligibility worker is responsible for explaining more requirements now than under AFDC. This includes new forms, such as a substance abuse agreement and referrals to work programs. The supervisor believed that when the changes in the program were first implemented some individuals decided not to apply. However,

Exhibit 4.1		TANF Application Process: Hinds County, MS	
	Reception/ Intake	Application Interview	Pending Application Requirement: Complete Information and Verifications
Information Provided by Client:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purpose of visit • Name, address, SSN • Income and expenses • Declaration whether anyone has been convicted of a drug felony since August 1996 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information on all individuals included in the household (marital status, income/resources, etc.) • Signature assigning child support rights to the State • Signature agreeing to conditions of the Personal Responsibility Contract • Signature indicating that applicant either does not have a substance abuse problem or agreeing to seek treatment for a problem 	Additional information and verifications
Information Provided by Agency:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1st page of the application • Appointment letter and list of items needed for the eligibility interview • Answers any questions regarding application or required verifications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss TANF work requirements and available support services • Explain possible exemptions from work requirement • TANF rights and responsibilities • Description of child support requirements • Review the Personal Responsibility Contract • Review the Substance Abuse Treatment agreement 	
Applicant Decisions:	Whether or not to submit 1 st page of application and officially file an application	Whether to sign required forms and continue the application process	Whether to complete pending application requirements within 30-day processing timeframe
Application Results:	<p>No Applicant does not begin process</p> <p>Yes File an application and receive an eligibility appointment within 3 to 5 business days</p>	<p>No Applicant does not continue process</p> <p>Yes Applicant has rest of processing period to submit required verification documents</p>	<p>No TANF denied due to incomplete application; other benefits denied or granted</p> <p>Yes TANF benefits granted or TANF benefits denied due to circumstantial ineligibility; other benefits denied or granted</p>

the informant felt that this dampening effect on applications was temporary only and dissipated over time as low-income families became more familiar with the new policies.

2. Knox County, Tennessee

Overview

Knox County is the third largest county in Tennessee and includes the City of Knoxville. According to the State policy survey, there is a requirement to complete a personal responsibility plan, cooperate with the child support enforcement agency, have up-to-date child immunizations, and verify school attendance for minor children. All of these requirements were reported to predate national welfare reform. The TANF Program in Tennessee is known as “Families First.”

Application Process

Exhibit 4.2 displays the process generally followed by TANF applicants in Knox County. The process has one additional, though optional, step compared to Hinds County, Mississippi. Applicants must agree to cooperate with child support enforcement while filling out the initial application form. Once applicants complete the form they are given by the receptionist, they are offered an optional pre-application screening meeting for that same day. While the office prefers that applicants attend this meeting, many leave the office after turning in their application and they are mailed an appointment letter. The application is filed once it is signed, given to the receptionist, and entered into the State’s computer system.

The pre-application screening meeting is mainly designed to provide additional information about TANF. Applicants who stay for the meeting watch an informational video and then discuss TANF Program requirements and required verification documents with office staff. The application is filed at the end of the meeting, and applicants are given an appointment for an eligibility interview. If applicants stay for the meeting they may be able to get appointments more quickly than individuals who choose not to stay. If appointment letters need to be generated, applicants’ information is sent to another location that handles appointment letters. In these cases, appointments will be set at least eight days ahead.

When applicants return for an application interview they need to complete a Personal Responsibility Plan (PRP). The PRP lists the initial activities applicants must engage in for their required work activities once they are determined eligible for benefits. The plan also explains the support services, including child care and transportation, that are offered to clients while they participate in activities. The first activity for non-working clients is a multi-day orientation. If applicants are working and unable to attend the orientation, the case manager will spend more time during the eligibility interview going over information about employment and training and other issues covered during orientation. Clients must agree to the PRP in order for their applications to move forward.

Once the application interview is completed applicants must turn in any remaining verifications. They are generally given 30 to 40 days from the filing date, depending on the backlog of cases the office is handling.

**Exhibit 4.2
TANF Application Process: Knox County, TN**

	Reception/ Intake	Pre-screening Meeting (OPTIONAL)	Application Interview	Pending Application Requirement: Complete Information and Verifications
Information Provided by Client:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purpose of visit • Family needs • Signature on application indicating request for assistance and agreement to cooperate with Child Support Enforcement Agency. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summary information about family, resources, income 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Detailed information about household composition, income, assets and work history • Come to agreement with case manager regarding work activities included in the Personal Responsibility Plan (PRP) • Verification documents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional information and verifications
Information Provided by Agency:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Application form, including rights and responsibilities and an agreement to cooperate with child support • Provide instructions and answer questions regarding application form 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss programs available to applicant • Describe required verification documents • Schedule an appointment with a case manager 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overview of available programs • Discussion of PRP which establishes the work activities the applicant will be required to meet once they are determined eligible for benefits. • Describes available support services. • List of verification documents still needed to complete the application • Describes timelines for the rest of the application process • Provide information sheet on language barriers, child support handbook, Families First handouts, civil rights handout, voter registration card. 	
Applicant Decisions:	<p>Whether to begin the application process</p> <pre> graph TD A[Whether to begin the application process] --> B[No] A --> C[Yes] </pre>	<p>Whether to continue the application process</p> <pre> graph TD A[Whether to continue the application process] --> B[No] A --> C[Yes] </pre>	<p>Whether to sign the PRP and complete the eligibility interview</p> <pre> graph TD A[Whether to sign the PRP and complete the eligibility interview] --> B[No] A --> C[Yes] </pre>	<p>Whether to submit remaining verifications within 30-40 day processing period</p> <pre> graph TD A[Whether to submit remaining verifications within 30-40 day processing period] --> B[No] A --> C[Yes] </pre>
Application Results:	<p>No Applicant does not begin process</p> <p>Yes Applicant begins the process by filing an application with either the receptionist or with the pre-screener later that same day</p>	<p>No Applicant withdraws application</p> <p>Yes Application becomes officially filed</p>	<p>No Applicant does not continue process</p> <p>Yes Proceeds with application</p>	<p>No TANF denied due to incomplete application; other benefits denied or granted</p> <p>Yes TANF benefits granted or TANF benefits denied due to circumstantial ineligibility; other benefits denied or granted</p>

Staff Perception of Change

The staff interviewed indicated that application procedures have not changed much, if at all, since the implementation of national welfare reform. While the program has undergone extensive changes, applicants are not affected until after they are approved for assistance. The main change in the application process is that while under AFDC the eligibility interview was almost exclusively devoted to eligibility issues, there is now a great deal of time spent on work activities and requirements, the PRP, and case management that explores potential issues and concerns. The staff thought that only a small number of applicants are choosing not to pursue benefits because of the program requirements. They indicated that many applicants are excited by the opportunities presented for employment and training. The staff said that the availability of childcare and transportation are key support services that encourage applicants to participate. In addition, they feel that Tennessee continues to offer education opportunities to TANF clients that other States have discontinued or de-emphasized. This makes potential applicants more willing to complete the process.

3. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Overview

Philadelphia is the largest city in Pennsylvania and the fifth largest city in the nation. The respondent to the State policy survey on TANF application policies reported that Pennsylvania requires that applicants sign a personal responsibility plan and cooperate with the child support enforcement agency.

Application Process

Exhibit 4.3 shows the process a TANF applicant goes through in the Philadelphia office. While the State requirements are no more extensive than the ones in Mississippi and Tennessee, there are a number of additional steps in the process.

Applicants first meet a receptionist who provides the application form. Applicants are not required to complete the entire form at this time. Once applicants have entered some information, they meet with a Customer Service Representative who helps them complete their applications. Applications are considered officially filed at the end of this meeting and applicants then move on to meet with an intake worker. The main purpose of this meeting is to have applicants sign a form authorizing the release of information and to provide applicants with a list of items to be verified. The intake worker will respond to questions about TANF rules and regulations, including work requirements, but most of this information is explained later. A second visit to the office is then scheduled, typically about one week later. Staff indicated that the first visit to the office usually takes about 2½ hours, including time in the waiting room.

The second visit constitutes the formal eligibility interview. All members of the household who are over age 18 are required to attend and sign the completed application. Applicants are required to sign forms agreeing to cooperate with the child support enforcement agency. The eligibility worker discusses TANF requirements and child immunization requirements. While applicants do not need to show proof of immunization prior to approval, they are required to take steps to ensure that their children are properly immunized or face penalties.

Exhibit 4.3

TANF Application Process: Philadelphia, PA

	Pending Application Requirements:						
	Reception/ Intake	Meet with a Customer Service Representative	Initial Meeting with Intake Worker	Formal Eligibility Interview (“Call Back Interview”)	Meet with Career Development Unit Worker	Meet with Child Support Worker	Complete Information and Verifications
Information Provided by Client:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Purpose of Visit, Name, Address, Social Security Number, and Signature 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Purpose of visit Formal submission (i.e., official filing) of application form 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sign a form authorizing other organizations to release information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Incomes, assets, and expenses Household composition Sign forms acknowledging rights and responsibilities with regard to child support enforcement requirements Sign form agreeing to cooperate with child support enforcement agency. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information on work history, education, and training Provide information on child care expenses and needs Sign preliminary Agreement of Mutual Responsibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide Detailed Information to locate non-custodial parent. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide Verification documents not brought in at the call back interview”
Information Provided by Agency:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Application form 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assistance with application forms Description of Available programs Respond to questions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide list of items to be verified Briefly answer questions about TANF rules/regulations and work requirements. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Describe TANF rules, work requirements and time limits. Describe child immunization requirement Explain processing timelines and the next steps in the application process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conduct employability assessment Develop Personalized Agreement of Mutual Responsibility Explain employment and training options Describe special allowances for clothing and transportation Explain income Reporting requirements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Describe client rights and responsibilities Describe rights of the agency to secure a portion of the child support payment. 	
Applicant Decisions:	<p>Whether to file an application form</p> <pre> graph TD A[Whether to file an application form] --> B[No] A --> C[Yes] </pre>	<p>Whether to continue the application process</p> <pre> graph TD A[Whether to continue the application process] --> B[No] A --> C[Yes] </pre>	<p>Whether to sign form releasing information</p> <pre> graph TD A[Whether to sign form releasing information] --> B[No] A --> C[Yes] </pre>	<p>Whether to sign required forms</p> <pre> graph TD A[Whether to sign required forms] --> B[No] A --> C[Yes] </pre>	<p>Whether to complete pending application requirements within the 30-day timeframe</p> <pre> graph TD A[Whether to complete pending application requirements within the 30-day timeframe] --> B[No] A --> C[Yes] </pre>		
Application Results:	<p>No Applicant does not begin process</p> <p>Yes Complete application and agree to meet with a customer service representative that same day</p>	<p>No Does not continue process</p> <p>Yes Continue process by meeting with the intake worker that same day</p>	<p>No Does not continue process</p> <p>Yes Proceed with the application process and return for an eligibility interview about one week later</p>	<p>No Does not continue process</p> <p>Yes Wait to see career development worker and child support worker that same day</p>	<p>No TANF denied due to incomplete application; other benefits denied or granted</p> <p>Yes TANF benefits granted or TANF benefits denied due to circumstantial ineligibility; other benefits denied or granted</p>		

Following the eligibility interview, applicants meet with a worker from the Career Development Unit. The focus of this meeting is the work requirements, and it includes an employability assessment and the development of a personalized Agreement of Mutual Responsibility. The State survey respondent indicated that an employability assessment was not conducted during the application process, but in Philadelphia this is considered part of the process. The Career Development worker also describes some support services, such as special allowances for clothing and transportation.

The next step, usually completed the same day, is a meeting with a child support enforcement worker. During this meeting, applicants are requested to provide detailed information needed to locate non-custodial parents. The three meetings required on the day of the eligibility interview usually take up to two hours. Once applicants have completed these meetings, the only potential remaining requirement is to provide verification documents that they did not bring to the eligibility interview.

Staff Perception of Change

Staff indicated that the process has undergone a great deal of change since welfare reform. The requirement to meet with a Career Development worker on the same day as an eligibility interview has emphasized the strong work first message. That emphasis has grown stronger because as TANF rules and procedures have changed, fewer applicants are exempted from the work requirements.

Staff indicated that two factors in particular are likely to affect decisions to apply. First, many of the individuals who would have applied in the past are now working. Second, some individuals are avoiding TANF because they do not want to take their child's father to court and make him legally liable for child support. Regarding the second factor, it should be noted that the penalty for not cooperating with the child support enforcement agency in Pennsylvania is a grant reduction, as opposed to a full family sanction. Based on the staff comments, it is not clear that applicants are aware that they may still receive a grant if they are unwilling or unable to cooperate.

4. Madison County, Indiana

Madison County is the tenth largest county in Indiana. The requirements listed in the State policy survey include completion of a personal responsibility plan, cooperation with child support enforcement, child immunizations, school attendance for minor children, and other behavioral requirements. While State respondents in Indiana said that applicant job search is an official application requirement, they also indicated that local offices have not been imposing the requirement during the recent economic downturn because of the limited job opportunities. For this reason, job search is not included as an application requirement in the description of the TANF application process in Madison County.

Application Process

Exhibit 4.4 shows the TANF application process in Madison County. When applicants first come into the office they go to the reception desk and are given an application form and information about other community resources, such as food pantries and social service providers. The application is considered filed when it is completed, signed, and returned to the clerk.

**Exhibit 4.4
TANF Application Process: Madison County, IN**

	Reception/ Intake	Meet with an Assessor ^a	Application Interview	Pending Application Requirement: Complete Information and Verifications
Information Provided by Client:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Purpose of visit Name, address, Social Security Number 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Income and assets Employment history 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work history Income, assets, and budget Proof of child immunizations and school attendance for children Sign Personal Responsibility Plan (PRP) Signature assigning child support and medical rights to the State 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Additional information and verifications
Information Provided by Agency:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Application form Information about other community resources (food pantries, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Answers any questions and provides referrals to other agencies. Checklist of required verification documents Eligibility interview appointment Phone number to call with any questions Preliminary assessment of eligibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide list of any verifications still needed Description of TANF rules and work requirements Discuss PRP Explains application processing timelines Provide a change reporting form 	
Applicant Decisions:	<p>Whether to file an application form and begin the application process</p>	<p>Whether to continue the application process</p>	<p>Whether to sign the PRP and other forms and continue the application process</p>	<p>Whether to complete pending application requirements within 30 day period</p>
Application Results:	<p>No Applicant does not begin process</p> <p>Yes file application and agree to meet with an assessor that same day</p>	<p>No Applicant does not continue process</p> <p>Yes Applicant proceeds with application and is given an appointment for an interview</p>	<p>No Applicant does not continue process</p> <p>Yes Applicant signs the forms and proceed with the application process.</p>	<p>No TANF denied due to incomplete application; other benefits denied or granted</p> <p>Yes TANF benefits granted or benefits due to circumstantial ineligibility; other benefits denied or granted</p>

^a Madison is the site of a welfare waiver experiment. Assessors determine whether the applicant belongs to the control (AFDC) group or not. If they are one of the 5 to 8 percent of applicants who are in the control group they follow old AFDC rules. This chart describes the process for the majority of applicants not in the control group.

After submitting an application, applicants meet with an “assessor” who reviews the form and makes sure it is complete. The assessor also goes over the verifications clients need to provide and answers any questions. While eligibility is not determined at this point, the assessor may advise applicants on potential eligibility. During the meeting with the assessor, applicants are randomly assigned to a treatment or control group because Madison County is the site of an ongoing welfare waiver evaluation. The vast majority of cases are subject to TANF rules, but between 5 to 8 percent follow old AFDC rules. The assessor provides applicants with an eligibility appointment within seven days of filing.

For applicants subject to TANF rules (treatment group), the eligibility interview involves collecting information from clients and informing them about program requirements. These requirements include proof of child immunization and satisfactory school attendance, however, these items do not need to be verified until the six month recertification interview. Applicants must also sign a Personal Responsibility Agreement. This is a standard State form that requires applicants to keep a safe and secure home, to remain drug-free, to keep their children in school, to keep immunizations up to date, and to cooperate with the work program. Applicants who decline to sign the agreement may receive benefits for their children, but not for themselves. Applicants must also assign child support payments to the State or they will not be included in the grant calculation.

Staff Perception of Change

Staff did not think that the application process has changed much since the implementation of welfare reform. The meeting with the assessor has been added to provide applicants better information about needed verifications. The staff thought this has improved the process and helped applicants. Staff did feel that when TANF and Medicaid were de-linked there were some individuals who decided they would rather just apply for Medicaid, but this did not involve a large number of applicants.

States Offering Diversion Payments Only

The two States with local sites offering diversion payments only are New Mexico and Virginia. As noted earlier, local offices in Florida can require applicant job search, but this is not done in Miami-Dade County.

1. Bernalillo County, New Mexico

Overview

Bernalillo County is the largest county in New Mexico and includes the City of Albuquerque. In the State policy survey New Mexico reported no employment-related TANF application requirements and only one non-employment-related application behavioral requirement, cooperation with the child support enforcement agency.

Application Process

As shown in Exhibit 4.5, Bernalillo County includes three basic steps to TANF certification. The first step is contact with a receptionist. Applications are available in the lobby, and a receptionist is present to answer questions and collect signed applications. Attached to the application is information about the State diversion payment program. If applicants appear to qualify for diversion,

Exhibit 4.5

TANF Application Process: Bernalillo County, NM

	Reception/ Intake		Application Interview		Pending Application Requirement:	
					Complete Information and Verifications	
Information Provided by Client:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Purpose of visit Completes application 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Income and assets Complete and sign the absent parent profile (includes SSN, work History, and address of the absent parent) Any reasons for work requirement exemptions 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Additional information and verifications 	
Information Provided by Agency:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Application form Information on diversion program Receptionist answers any questions and assists the Applicants to identify what programs meet their needs Pre-screening to determine eligibility for expedited Food Stamps 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rights and responsibilities Basic work requirement information. Determines whether applicant is a mandatory referral to work Requirement Checklist of items still needed for verification 			
Applicant Decisions:	Whether or not to file an application and begin the application process		Whether to continue the application process		Whether to complete pending application requirements within 30-day processing period	
Application Results:	<p>No Applicant does not begin process</p> <p>No Applicant does not begin process and accepts the diversion payment</p> <p>Yes Submits application to be filed, receives eligibility interview appointment for that same day or within five business days</p>		<p>No Applicant does not continue process</p> <p>Yes Sign forms and proceed with the application process</p>		<p>No TANF denied due to incomplete application; other benefits denied or granted</p> <p>Yes TANF benefits granted or TANF benefits denied due to circumstantial ineligibility; other benefits denied or granted</p>	

the receptionist may discuss the option. However, one of the criteria to be eligible for diversion is that applicants are able to meet their basic needs without monthly cash assistance; this disqualifies most applicants. Typically, only about one applicant per month receives the payment. After completed applications are submitted to the receptionist, they are considered filed. Depending on the number of people in the office that day, applicants may be seen by an eligibility worker that same day or may be given an appointment sometime within the next five days.

During the eligibility interview, applicants provide information to be used to determine eligibility and whether they are subject to the work requirement. They are also asked to complete the absent parent profile when appropriate. When the interview is completed, applicants are provided a checklist of items that still need to be verified. Once these items are verified, eligibility can be determined.

Staff Perception of Change

Staff reported that minimal changes have occurred to the application process since the implementation of welfare reform. The main change is that staff have to discuss far more program requirements during the eligibility interview. They do not think that it has had much of an effect on the willingness of individuals to apply. Occasionally someone will withdraw an application when they are informed of the work requirements. However, they believe the overall number of individuals completing the application process has remained relatively steady over the years since reform, and even increased slightly during the recent economic downturn.

2. Norfolk, Virginia

Overview

Norfolk is the second largest city in Virginia. According to the State policy survey, Virginia has no employment-related TANF application requirements. The State does have requirements for cooperation with the child support enforcement agency and requires proof of school attendance if a child was previously removed from a TANF grant because of truancy.

Application Process

As shown in Exhibit 4.6, the TANF application process in Norfolk is limited to the three basic application steps of intake, eligibility interview, and providing verifications. Applicants obtain an intake/inquiry form from a receptionist. This form covers basic identifying information and is designed to help receptionists determine if applicants have an open public assistance case in the system. If household members have no active cases, applicants are provided with a Request for Assistance form. As long as applicants enter their name, address, and signature, the application can be filed, but they need to fill out an application before seeing an intake worker. Most applicants see a TANF intake worker the same day they file, unless they arrive very late at the office or do not have time to wait.

Exhibit 4.6
TANF Application Process: Norfolk, VA

	Reception/ Intake	Application Interview with a TANF Intake Worker	Pending Application Requirement: Complete Information and Verifications
Information Provided by Client:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purpose of visit • Name, address, race, whether receiving any Assistance now, household composition. • Basic information on each person in the Household (birthdate, sex, and Social Security Number) • Signature on Request for Assistance Form 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recent changes in household circumstances (to determine eligibility for diversion assistance) • Income, assets, expenses • Sign the form assigning child support and provide detailed information on the absent parent(s). • School attendance of minor children in the household. • Sign Statement of Facts form, verifying that all information on the full application form was entered correctly. • Authorize release of information from other organizations/agencies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional information and verifications
Information Provided by Agency:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intake/inquiry form • Request for Assistance form • Assistance completing forms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rights and responsibilities • Discuss availability of diversion cash payments and restrictions on benefits if accepted • Provide general description of work requirements and criteria for exemptions. • Describe change reporting requirements • Describe personal responsibilities under the TANF Program (participant behavioral requirements such as childhood immunization, school attendance, and work requirements) • Describe child support enforcement requirements • Provide list of verification documentation needed • Check for school attendance for children with a history of truancy 	
Applicant Decisions:	<p>Whether or not to complete forms and begin the application process</p>	<p>Whether or not to complete and sign the required forms and continue the application process</p>	<p>Whether to submit verification documents within 30-day processing period</p>
Application Results:	<p>No Applicant does not begin process</p> <p>Yes File the application by filling out request for assistance form and agree to meet with an intake worker either that day or on another day</p>	<p>No Application is incomplete and withdrawn or denied</p> <p>No Applicant does not continue the application process and accepts the diversion payment</p> <p>Yes Proceeds with application</p>	<p>No TANF denied due to incomplete application; other benefits denied or granted</p> <p>Yes TANF benefits granted or TANF benefits denied due to circumstantial ineligibility; other benefits denied or granted</p>

Intake workers explain the program rules and discuss the option of diversion payments with each applicant. They encourage families to apply for diversionary assistance if they think their needs will be temporary and inform all applicants that if they accept diversionary assistance they will be ineligible for TANF for a set period of time, depending on the size of the diversion payment. Applicants are eligible if they can provide evidence of a temporary loss of income or a temporary emergency need. Once verification is received, applicants who apply for diversion will be issued a check within five working days. Applicants who accept diversion payments are not required to cooperate with the child support enforcement agency. Staff reported that it had been rare for clients to receive diversion assistance, but a change in State policy in the second half of 2001 has led to an increase in the number of applicants receiving diversion assistance. Staff estimated that the office provides diversion assistance to about 10 applicants a month, or approximately 10 percent of the new TANF applicants who come to the office.

Applicants who do not opt for a diversion payment must sign a form assigning child support to the agency and providing detailed information on the noncustodial parents. Applicants are provided with a list of verification documents that are needed to complete the application; they have 30 days from the date of filing to provide the information.

Staff Perception of Change

The main change noted by the staff is that workers must discuss greater amounts of information with applicants. They also noted that over time the requirements that must be met by clients have been clarified and this has made it easier to explain to clients and to implement the policies. Staff noted that there has been a reduction in the number of applicants. They indicated that churning has been reduced because many of the individuals who previously would have been on and off the program are no longer eligible due to the State's two-year time limit. The staff indicated that the application process is not the point at which applicants may leave the program if they decide not to meet the work requirements. The work requirements are not explained until after eligibility is determined and the clients meet with another worker responsible for ongoing case management.

States With Employment-Related Application Requirements Only

The two States with employment-related application requirements only are Nevada, and Wisconsin.

1. Washoe County, Nevada

Overview

Washoe County is the second largest county in Nevada and includes Reno, which is the second largest city in Nevada. The TANF application requirements listed in the State policy survey include employability assessments, cooperation with child support enforcement, and school attendance for minor children.

Application Process

Exhibit 4.7 presents the TANF application process in the Washoe County, Nevada office. Applicants who come to the office may pick up an application in the lobby. Clerical staff at the reception desk answer questions about the application and provide general information about the programs. The application is turned in at the reception desk. The clerical staff may provide applicants with a list of community resources, such as shelters, social service agencies, and food banks. Applicants are typically given appointments within three to five days after filing.

The eligibility interview for TANF lasts about two hours. Eligibility specialists collect applicant information and provide information on available programs and their associated requirements. Workers also describe needed verifications. A Personal Responsibility Plan (PRP) is completed and applicants are informed about the applicant job search requirement. Unless they meet one of the criteria for exemption, applicants are required to list at least five employer contacts each week that the application is pending. Applicants are required to drop off the contact sheet at the end of each week. The requirement was recently changed from ten to five contacts per week in response to the weakened economy. Transportation and childcare assistance are available during job search.

During the eligibility interview, applicants are told that they are required to attend a child support enforcement orientation and a medical information session covering health plan options available under Medicaid. These sessions are scheduled at regular times during the week. The purpose of the orientation is to complete a child support application, including providing information about the non-custodial parent. If applicants have good reason for not being able to attend these sessions a worker can offer a one-on-one orientation. These requirements need to be completed before cash assistance is approved. Additional referrals to community resources or social workers may be noted in the PRP, although applicants do not have to follow up the referrals as a condition of eligibility determination. Social workers are available at the office to provide referrals for substance abuse or domestic violence issues.

Once applicants attend the required orientations and submit the appropriate verifications, cases can be processed. The case must be processed within 45 days of filing and it usually takes at least 30 days. This means applicants need to engage in job search and submit contacts for more than one week.

Staff Perception of Change

The staff person who was interviewed indicated that the process has changed greatly as a result of welfare reform. The biggest change is the availability of support services for applicants to look for work. She indicated that these services have enabled many applicants to obtain employment before the application process is complete. Many of them choose to obtain benefits even if employed, and are able to do so because of the State's income disregard rules. The informant felt that the availability of services has actually drawn some people to the office who might not otherwise apply. She did not think that the number of steps in the process has discouraged applicants.

**Exhibit 4.7
TANF Application Process: Washoe County, NV**

Pending Application Requirements:

	Reception/ Intake	Eligibility Interview	Complete Information & Verifications	Attend Child Support Orientation	Attend Medical Information Session	Conduct Job Search
Information Provided by Client:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purpose of visit • Completed application form 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Income, assets, and expenses • Employment history, work activity preferences, and potential barriers to work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional information and verifications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete a child Support application with information about the non-custodial parent. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Submit weekly contact sheet listing at least 5 employer contacts per week
Information Provided by Agency:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Application form • General questions about available programs • Community resource information, such as shelters, food banks • Appointment date and list of needed verifications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete information about available programs and their associated requirements • Provide list of verification documents still needed • Rights and responsibilities • Assess employability • Discuss the Personal Responsibility Plan (PRP) • Provides referral to social worker if necessary • Inform applicant about up-front job search requirement <p>Referrals to transportation and child care assistance to cover up-front job search activities</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe child support requirements • Describe services offered by child support agency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information about the various health plan options available under Medicaid 	
Applicant Decisions:	<p>Whether or not to begin the application process</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p> <p style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> ↓ ↓ </p> <p style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> No Yes </p>	<p>Whether to sign and submit the PRP and continue the application process</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p> <p style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> ↓ ↓ </p> <p style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> No Yes </p>	<p>Whether to complete pending application requirements within 45-day processing period</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p> <p style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> ↓ ↓ </p> <p style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> No Yes </p>			
Application Results:	<p>No Applicant does not begin the process</p> <p>Yes Files an application receives an eligibility interview appointment scheduled for 3 to 5 days after filing</p>	<p>No Applicant does not continue application process</p> <p>Yes Proceed with application requirements</p>	<p>No TANF denied due to incomplete application; other benefits denied or granted</p> <p>Yes TANF benefits granted or TANF benefits denied due to circumstantial ineligibility; other benefits denied or granted</p>			

2. Dane County, Wisconsin

Overview

Dane County is the second largest county in Wisconsin and includes Madison, the second largest city. The Survey of State Policies indicates that TANF applicants in Wisconsin must complete an employability assessment, work registration, job search, a personal responsibility plan, cooperate with the child support enforcement agency, and provide proof of school attendance for minor children prior to application approval. All of the requirements in Wisconsin predate national welfare reform.

Application Process

Exhibit 4.8 summarizes the TANF application process in Dane County. Potential applicants enter the office and contact a clerical support worker. Workers provide customers with information about the variety of programs available at the office, such as TANF, Medicaid, and Food Stamps, along with other community resources that may be available. Clerical support workers provide applicants with a Customer Profile Form and review the completed form. Applicants who are custodial parents requesting W2 (i.e., Wisconsin's TANF Program), are pregnant and due within 30 days, or are the parent of a minor child and unemployed, are referred to the next step in the TANF application process. At this point, a Request for Assistance is generated using the State's computer system for those applicants who appear to meet the criteria for TANF. This sets the application date, collects basic demographic information, and starts the 30-day intake clock ticking for food stamps. Applicants are given a W2 Questionnaire.

The next step is a meeting with a Community Resource Specialist (CRS), who is employed by a private agency with a service contract with the welfare department. This usually occurs on the first day applicants come into the office, but if the CRS has gone home for the day, applicants are given an appointment to return on another day. The CRS completes an extensive interview with applicants lasting approximately 30 to 45 minutes. Applicants are asked questions about work history, barriers to employment, child support, and their family situation. Applicants are told about a variety of services and resources that are available, including those available to non-TANF recipients.

The CRS may or may not refer customers to work activities before the eligibility interview. Activities can include a group employment search or a group activity. They may refer individuals to an Employment Placement Specialist who is employed by a different contractor. The CRS can also offer temporary subsidized child care and transportation assistance for up to two weeks so applicants can participate in W2 activities. However, while a CRS may refer applicants to an activity, the activities are not mandatory. Customers will only be required to complete the activity once they meet with an Employment Planning Specialist (EPS) who is responsible for determining eligibility for W2.¹ Applicants are often encouraged to begin a work activity because they will not be approved for benefits until they have become engaged in an activity.

¹ The Employment Planning Specialist title is a Dane County title. Material from the State agency refers to this position as a Financial Employment Planner or FEP.

Exhibit 4.8

TANF Application Process: Dane County, WI

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	Pending Application Requirements:				
	Reception/ Intake (Meeting with Clerical Support Worker)	Meet With Community Resource Specialist (CRS)	Meet with Employment Planning Specialist (EPS)	Complete Verifications	Begin Work Activity
Information provided by client:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Purpose of visit Name, address, Social Security Number, income of all household members. Applicant's marital status Barriers to employment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Completed W-2 Questionnaire including information on non-custodial parent, work and education history, expectations for W-2 program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Detailed information on income and assets Employment history Barriers to employment Authorization to release information (including children's school attendance records) Agreement to cooperate with child support agency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Additional remaining information and verification 	Varies depending on activity. Applicant may have to submit job contacts, participate in workshops etc.
Information provided by agency:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Programs and community resources available Rights and responsibilities List of items to be verified Provide notice that applicant may be subject to front-end verification Provide "Customer Profile Form" Generate "Request for Assistance" which sets an appointment date, collects basic demographic information and files the application. Give applicant's who appear to be eligible a "W2 Questionnaire" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Services and resources available from the agency and within the community Description of activities the applicant may be asked to participate in prior to approval (i.e., job search, group activities) Assessment of the client's likely eligibility for cash assistance under W-2 (client can continue to next step regardless of this assessment) May refer applicant work activity though participation is not required until applicant meets with CRS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Verification information required Description of rules for cash assistance Whether client is job-ready (if client is determined to be job ready they are not eligible for cash assistance though they can receive case management services) 		Depends on activity may include assistance with job search, or orientation to Community Service Job program.
Applicant decisions:	Complete forms and choose to continue application process for W-2	Whether or not to proceed with W-2 application	Whether or not to proceed with W-2 application	Whether or not to submit required documents within 7 working days after meeting with employment specialist	Whether or not to complete activity
Application results:	<p>No Applicant does not begin process</p> <p>Yes Applicant continues process by meeting with CRS that same day</p>	<p>No Applicant decides not to apply for W-2. Process may continue for other benefits</p> <p>Yes client receives an appointment to meet with EPS 2 to 3 days later</p>	<p>No Application process ends. Process may continue for other benefits</p> <p>Yes if eligible for cash assistance needs to begin activity before approval, if not is provided case management services</p>	<p>No Application process ends</p> <p>Yes If client has begun activity they are approved for cash assistance</p>	<p>No Cash assistance is denied</p> <p>Yes Client is approved for cash assistance</p>

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The CRS can also advise clients about their likely eligibility for cash assistance. The fundamental difference between Wisconsin and the other ten States included in the local office interviews is that applicants may meet the financial eligibility standards for TANF, complete all requirements, but still be denied cash assistance. Applicants who are considered ready for employment will not be provided cash, though they are eligible for case management services. Some applicants do withdraw applications when they are told they are unlikely to be eligible for cash. This was apparently more common in the past, but fewer applicants who are job-ready currently apply for W2.

Once customers are finished with the CRS, they are given an appointment to meet with the EPS. This meeting is required to be held within five business days, though it is often held as soon as 2 to 3 days. The EPS has the information clients have filled out along with a summary of the meeting between the customer and the CRS. The EPS conducts an interactive interview that covers eligibility for TANF, food stamps, and Medicaid. During this interview, the EPS collects information on work history, barriers, and job readiness, along with required verifications. The worker also determines if applicants are eligible for cash assistance or whether they should be offered case management services only. This is mainly a judgement call for the EPS. There are guidelines regarding the applicant's work history and job barriers, but the EPS makes the ultimate decision. Clients who are offered case management services only often decline them.

If the EPS determines that clients are eligible for cash assistance, but they have not begun a work activity, the EPS will schedule one. Usually a second appointment is required, because applicants have not begun an activity and lack verification items. Once applicants submit all verifications and have begun an activity, the EPS enrolls applicants in one of four employment and training options. Until this point applicants are not cash assistance recipients.

Staff Perceptions of Change

Wisconsin has been experimenting with welfare reform for many years. The program had already been transformed by the time national welfare reform was approved. The biggest change after national welfare reform was the implementation of W2. The specific change that had the most effect was ending the entitlement to cash assistance. Even if clients meet the financial eligibility requirements, they may be denied cash. This has been a key factor leading to a large reduction in the caseload. Many applicants decline services once they find they are ineligible for cash, and many individuals do not come in because they know they may be denied cash benefits.

States Offering Both Employment-Related Application Requirements and Diversion Payments

The three States with local sites offering both employment-related application requirements and diversion payments are Connecticut, Florida, and Maine. As noted earlier, local offices in Florida can require applicant job search, but this is not done in Miami-Dade County; nevertheless, applicants must attend a program orientation.

1. Hartford, Connecticut

Overview

Hartford is the third largest city in Connecticut. According to the State policy survey, Connecticut's requirements include attendance at an orientation session, an employability assessment, completion of a personal responsibility plan, cooperation with child support enforcement, and finger-imaging or fingerprinting.

Application Process

As shown in Exhibit 4.9, the first staff person potential applicants see is known as a “greeter.” The greeter's job is to find out what individuals want to apply for and give them a short form on which applicants provide their name, social security number, and the time they came into the office. The preferred procedure is for applicants then to wait for an eligibility interview. However, if it is at the end of the day, or if applicants are unable or unwilling to wait, they can complete an Application Assistance Request to file their application and then come back for a scheduled interview. The typical wait for an intake worker is 15-30 minutes, though there are some days when it can be considerably longer.

Intake workers responsible for the eligibility interview conduct an interactive interview and enter applicants' information directly into the computer system. Applicants are informed about child support enforcement requirements and asked to sign a form indicating that they will cooperate or that they believe that they are exempt from the requirement. They are also asked to provide information about noncustodial parents. Eligibility workers also screen applicants to determine if they are eligible for a diversion payment. If a worker considers an applicant a good candidate for diversion, the eligibility worker will discuss the option. However, this is very rare and diversion assistance is seldom offered. During the interview, workers also determine if applicants are exempt from a requirement for an employability assessment. If they are not exempt, applicants wait for an interview with a representative of the Family Independence Program.

The Family Independence worker interview covers work history and education, day care needs, and any obstacles to employment. At the end of the interview, applicants are provided with an appointment for an orientation to the program. While the orientation is an application requirement, in practice the eligibility office is unlikely to know whether or not applicants have completed orientation at the time of eligibility determination. Appointments for orientation may be made before or after eligibility determination is completed.

Applicants continue the process by meeting with a specialist from the child support enforcement agency. The main purpose of this meeting is to go over the child support enforcement process and review information provided about non-custodial parents.

Exhibit 4.9
TANF Application Process: Hartford, CT

	Reception/ "Greeter"	Eligibility Interview	Meet with Child Support Specialist Complete	Pending Application Requirements: Meet with Family Independence Representative to Complete Service Needs Assessment	Verification Requirements	Go to Orientation Meeting
Information Provided by Client:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Purpose of visit Name, Social Security Number 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demographic information Family and household composition Incomes, assets, expenses Child support information including acknowledgment of paternity, and agreement to cooperate or request for a good cause exemption Job history, need for short-term assistance (to screen for eligibility for TANF diversion assistance) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information about noncustodial parent(s) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work history and education Day care needs Obstacles to employment that might exempt applicant from the time limit and work requirement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Additional/ remaining information and verifications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employment history and goals Signature on preliminary employment plan
Information Provided by Agency:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Screener form" (requests name and SSN) or Application Assistance Request Form if client does not want to wait in the office for a same-day interview 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Description of child support enforcement requirements and forms Client and agency responsibilities List of required verification documents, personalized to applicant List of allowable verification documentation Description of TANF diversion option (if client is eligible) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Additional details about child support enforcement process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information about work requirements Appointment for an orientation session 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides overview of program's work requirements and designs preliminary employment plan tailored to individual.
Applicant Decisions:	Whether to complete screener or Application Assistance Request Form	Whether to request TANF assistance (May accept diversion grant, but this is rarely an option and rarely chosen when it is)	Whether or not to go to these required meetings and submit and sign required forms within the 30-day processing period			
Application Results:	<p>No Applicant does not begin process</p> <p>Yes Applicant moves on to eligibility interview</p>	<p>No Applicant does not apply for TANF, may continue process for other benefits</p> <p>Yes, complete forms and proceed to meet with a Family Independence Rep and a Child Support specialist that same day and attend a scheduled orientation about 7 days later. Application is filed upon completion of Application Assistance Request Form</p>	<p>No, TANF denied due to incomplete application; other benefits denied or granted^b</p> <p>Yes, TANF benefits granted or TANF denied due to circumstantial ineligibility; other benefits denied or granted</p>			
<p>a All applicants are screened to determine whether they are at risk of fraud. Approximately 50 percent of applicant households have unannounced home visits to investigate potential fraud and must answer an investigator's questions. If no one is home when the investigator comes by, the applicant is sent a letter asking the individual to contact the office within five days, if they do not hear back within that time, the application is denied.</p> <p>b While attendance at orientation is an application requirement, TANF benefits are usually granted before the agency knows whether the client has attended the orientation.</p>						

The meeting with a child support enforcement worker is the last step completed on the first day of the process. Staff indicated that this meeting usually takes between 1½ and 2 hours. After this meeting, the only step all applicants generally must complete before eligibility is determined is to provide required verifications. Applicants may attend orientation, but as noted, in practice this does not necessarily occur before eligibility determination. Staff also reported that approximately half of the applicants are subject to an unannounced home visit; the visit must be successfully completed before eligibility determination can proceed. Applicants are selected for home visits on the basis of characteristics found to be associated with error-prone cases.

Staff Perception of Change

The staff interviewed differed on their assessments of how much the process has changed, though it was not clear that they were all using the period before welfare reform as a frame of reference. The number of steps in the process has clearly increased. One staff member thought that the clients are overwhelmed with information on the day they have their eligibility interview, employment assessment, and meeting with child support enforcement worker. None of the staff interviewed believed the application process itself has been deterring individuals from applying or completing the process. In fact, one staff member mentioned that the 100 percent disregard for earned income Connecticut has implemented during the first 21 months of TANF receipt has provided an important incentive for applicants to complete the process and find employment.

2. Miami-Dade County, Florida

Overview

Miami-Dade is the largest county in Florida and includes the City of Miami. The requirements reported in the State policy survey include attendance at orientation, work registration, cooperation with child support enforcement, proof of child immunizations, and proof of school attendance. Florida has devolved many responsibilities for TANF to local public-private coalitions. The State-level informants reported that local offices have the option of requiring employability assessments, job search or job search training, or other work activities prior to application approval.

Application Process

As shown in Exhibit 4.10, individuals interested in applying for benefits in Miami-Dade County go to the reception desk to obtain an application known as a Request for Assistance. Applications are filed once they are submitted and include at least the applicant's name, address, and signature. After applicants hand in the Request for Assistance they are supposed to meet with an interviewing clerk. Most applicants stay and meet the clerk, but if they leave the office the application is still filed and they are mailed an appointment letter for the eligibility interview. The interviewing clerk screens applicants to see if they are eligible for expedited food stamps. The clerk is also supposed to determine whether or not applicants are likely to be subject to work requirements and, if so, provides a form to be taken to a TANF work contractor. However, not all interviewing clerks routinely

Exhibit 4.10

TANF Application Process: Miami-Dade County, FL

Pending Application Requirements:

	Reception/ Intake	Meet with Interviewing Clerk (OPTIONAL)	Eligibility Interview	Complete Information and Verifications	Child Support Cooperation	Meet with TANF Work Contractor
Information Provided by Client:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Purpose of visit Name, Social Security Number, Citizenship, Income, and assets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clarify information on application 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Household composition (complete with birth certificates or SSN for everyone) INS cards (for non-citizens) Income and assets Verifications for school enrollment for minors and child immunizations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Additional information and verifications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contact Child Support Enforcement agency to schedule an appointment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Register for work
Information Provided by Agency:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Application form called a "Request for Assistance" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If mandatory work participant, provide form client must have completed that will verify that a client has been provided with an overview of the work program Provide list of verification still needed Eligibility appointment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides a dedicated phone number for TANF clients to call to reach the Child Support Enforcement agency 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide eligibility worker a notice of cooperation verifying that the applicant has scheduled an appointment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information about work requirements
Applicant Decisions:	Whether or not to file an application	Whether to continue application process	Whether to sign forms and continue or complete the application process	Whether to complete pending application requirements within timeframe		
	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> <div style="text-align: center;"> ↓ No </div> <div style="text-align: center;"> ↓ Yes </div> </div>	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> <div style="text-align: center;"> ↓ No </div> <div style="text-align: center;"> ↓ Yes </div> </div>	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> <div style="text-align: center;"> ↓ No </div> <div style="text-align: center;"> ↓ Yes </div> </div>	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> <div style="text-align: center;"> ↓ No </div> <div style="text-align: center;"> ↓ Yes </div> </div>		
Application Results:	<p>No Applicant does not begin process</p> <p>Yes Begin the application process and meet with an interviewing clerk that same day or receive an eligibility interview appointment in the mail</p>	<p>No applicant does not continue process</p> <p>Yes, receive appointment for eligibility interview typically scheduled for 3-5 days later</p>	<p>No does not continue process</p> <p>Yes, if all verification information is brought in then eligibility can be determined. If not, then case is pended for 10 days (this can be extended).</p>	<p>No, TANF denied due to incomplete application; other benefits denied or granted</p> <p>Yes, TANF benefits granted or TANF benefits denied due to circumstantial ineligibility; other benefits denied or granted</p>		

provide the form. The interviewing clerk also provides applicants with a list of verifications that need to be completed. Finally, an appointment is scheduled for an eligibility interview.

At the time the staff informant interview was conducted, appointments for eligibility interviews were being scheduled three to five business days after filing. Eligibility interviews are required to be scheduled within 15 days of filing.

At the eligibility interview, applicants are required to provide Social Security numbers or birth certificates for all household members. Applicants are given a telephone number for the Child Support Enforcement Agency that is used exclusively by TANF applicants. Applicants need to provide verifications, including proof of school enrollment and up-to-date child immunizations. Applicants informed about the meeting with the TANF work contractor may provide proof that they have completed that step at this point. If the interviewing clerk did not explain the requirement to meet with the work contractor, the eligibility worker will do so and provide the form to be completed.

Eligibility can be determined for applicants who provide all the verification information once they contact the child support enforcement agency. If applicants do not have all the information to be submitted, the case is pended for ten days. Once applicants call the child support enforcement agency and are given an appointment, the worker receives an automated notice of cooperation. The Child Support Enforcement agency has a large backlog of cases, and appointments usually occur many weeks after eligibility has been determined. Eligibility workers refer all questions about work requirements to a work contractor.

In order to complete the process, applicants must meet with a TANF work contractor. For some offices the contractor is located in the same building, but this is not always the case. The meeting with the work contractor is usually a brief one during which applicants are given a quick overview of requirements and the contractor completes the form that is used to “work register” applicants. This meets the orientation requirement in Miami-Dade County; there are other counties in Florida that require much more intensive, multi-day orientations (Botsko, et. al, 2001).

The staff interviewed for this study indicated that they have not implemented diversion payments, although they are part of State policy. Florida’s policy on diversions has changed a number of times since the enactment of welfare reform and although State policy-makers have attempted to encourage the use of diversion, not all local offices have implemented the policy.

Staff Perception of Change

The biggest change, according to staff, is that applicants are supposed to contact the child support enforcement agency before their applications can be approved. While there have been extensive changes relating to work requirements, these have not played a big role in changing the application process, because applicants have only to contact the work contractor prior to approval. Applicants do not have to complete any additional work-related activities. Although the ongoing work requirements may have reduced the number of applicants, it is likely not because of something that happens during the application process.

3. Portland, Maine

Overview

Portland is the largest city in Maine. The study office is a regional office serving Portland and surrounding counties. According to the State policy survey, application requirements include attendance at an orientation session, employability assessments and screening, completion of a personal responsibility plan, and cooperation with child support enforcement.

Application Process

As shown in Exhibit 4.11, the first staff person applicants meet is the receptionist. Once they inform the receptionist of the purpose of their visit, they are given a large packet of information. The receptionist asks applicants if they are able to fill out the forms and offers assistance if they have any problems. In order to file the application, individuals must put their name, signature, and date on the application form. The receptionist notifies an eligibility worker that there is an applicant needing an interview. A TANF eligibility specialist is usually available within 15 minutes.

The eligibility specialist goes over the forms provided by the receptionist. Applicants with children of non-custodial parents are required to assign child support payments to the State. Applicants who fail to do so are denied assistance. Applicants are also asked to submit information on the non-custodial parent. If applicants indicate they do not want to do so, the worker will try to determine if they have a good cause. Usually, the good cause is fear of physical harm from the non-custodial parent. If applicants do not have good cause, the application will still proceed. The staff indicated that they would open the case with full benefits, but that after the case is open, applicants would need to meet with a child support enforcement worker who would request a sanction if the client continued to refuse to provide information.

The eligibility specialist also discusses the Alternative Aid Program. This is a State-funded program in which the State pays for services for clients who need assistance to obtain or keep a job. This program is discussed with everyone, but the worker can determine if the assistance is appropriate. There are relatively few cases that qualify. The staff indicated that they authorize Alternative Assistance for two or three out of about 200 applicants annually. The eligibility specialist also discusses the Family Contract, describes the items that need to be verified, informs applicants that they are required to attend an orientation session, and provides them with an ASPIRE (i.e., the State work program) questionnaire they must complete prior to orientation.

Orientation is held once a week and applicants are required to attend within 30 days of filing the application. During orientation, applicants view a slide show on the types of assistance available, program policies, and requirements. Staff from the TANF agency, the ASPIRE program, and the child support enforcement agency explain their roles. Applicants are also shown how they can benefit from working while receiving TANF. The group part of the meeting lasts around 90 minutes and then all applicants must meet with their newly assigned ASPIRE case manager. This is a very brief meeting in which applicants are given further details about work requirements and a preliminary ASPIRE contract is signed. This contract is mostly a general statement of work requirements that will be revised once applicants begin to participate. Once this process is complete and applicants have submitted all verification information, eligibility for TANF can be determined.

Exhibit 4.11

TANF Application Process: Portland, ME

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Chapter 4: Local Office TANF Application Practices

	Reception/ Intake	Application Interview with a TANF Eligibility Specialist	Complete Information and Verifications	Attend Orientation	Meet With ASPIRE Case Manager
Information Provided by Client:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Purpose of visit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Purpose of visit Summary information to determine if meet the standards for deprivation (parental absence, disability, two unemployed parents) Income and assets Signature on form assigning child support, information on non-custodial parent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Additional Information and verifications 	Submit completed ASPIRE questionnaire (includes work history and plan for obtaining work)	Sign preliminary ASPIRE contract
Information Provided by Agency:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Application form Rights & responsibilities Alternative Aid (i.e., diversion assistance) application Information on time limits, domestic violence and good cause exemptions Authorization to release information Description of the procedures for collecting and distributing child support payments Child support enforcement forms Voter registration form 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Description of TANF Program and work requirements Description of the child support requirement Discussion of Alternative Aid to determine if appropriate for applicant Discuss the Family Contract List and description of items to be verified Informs applicant about required orientation session Provide a four-page ASPIRE (i.e., State work program) questionnaire to complete and bring to orientation 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> State-provided PowerPoint Presentation describing ASPIRE requirements 	Further details about work requirements
Applicant Decisions:	Whether or not to file an application and begin the application process	Whether or not to continue the application process	Whether to complete pending application requirements within 30-day timeframe		
	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> <div style="text-align: center;">↓ No</div> <div style="text-align: center;">↓ Yes</div> </div>	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> <div style="text-align: center;">↓ No</div> <div style="text-align: center;">↓ Yes</div> </div>	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> <div style="text-align: center;">↓ No</div> <div style="text-align: center;">↓ Yes</div> </div>		
Application Results:	<p>No Applicant does not begin process</p> <p>Yes Fill out an application and agree to meet with a TANF Eligibility Specialist that same day</p>	<p>No Application process ends, eligibility may be determined for other programs</p> <p>Yes Applicant proceeds with application</p>	<p>No TANF denied due to incomplete application; other benefits denied or granted</p> <p>Yes TANF benefits granted or TANF benefits denied due to circumstantial ineligibility; other benefits denied or granted</p>		
<p>a Applicant must sign form assigning child support for the process to continue, however they are not required to submit information on non-custodial parent before eligibility can be determined.</p>					

Staff Perception of Change

Program staff indicated that the major changes include a greater emphasis on program participants becoming more independent, and the ability of workers to provide the types of supportive services that help clients achieve this goal. The staff said that Maine has put a strong emphasis on ensuring that all eligible applicants have access to Medicaid and food stamps. They did not feel that the changes in the program were discouraging applications for these programs or for TANF.

Chapter Five: TANF Application Data and Trends

The Survey of State TANF Application Data Systems and Procedures requested information from all States about the data States currently collect, maintain, and report on TANF applications, approvals, denials, denials by reason, and diversion assistance.¹ This information helps address the issue of comparability of data across States and over time.

The application data survey collected information on changes in application data and data systems since the end of AFDC. State application approval rates can be affected by factors such as programmatic changes, but also by changes in State data definitions and measurement practices. Understanding if and how States have changed their definition of TANF applications filed, approved, and denied informs the analysis of State trends in applications and approvals.

For many federally funded programs, the data that States collect and maintain in routine statistical reports are set by Federal requirements. Under the AFDC program, States were required to report on a quarterly basis the number of applications received, approved, and denied or voluntarily withdrawn. Additionally, States were required to report the numbers of denied applications by reason for denial.

National welfare reform brought changes to reporting requirements. When PRWORA became effective in October 1996, Federal data reporting requirements were temporarily suspended until the publication of Federal TANF regulations. The Administration for Children and Families at DHHS was given the responsibility of developing new data reporting requirements for the States. As of October 1, 1999, DHHS reintroduced some basic TANF application data reporting requirements. Although previously required to report the total number of applications received in a quarter, States were now required only to report the total number of applications approved and applications denied. The applications may actually have been filed or received in a previous month or quarter. States were still required to report the application data on a quarterly basis, however, the reporting form also includes a month-by-month breakdown for each category. The requirement to report data on denials by reason was not reinstated.

One of the changes in the application process that has been discussed throughout this report is the development of diversion programs that offer lump sum payments or vouchers to potential TANF applicants in lieu of ongoing cash assistance. Although some States began diversion programs prior to national welfare reform, States have not been required by the Federal government to collect or report diversion data. The State survey sought information on what data States have collected on diversion policies.

Several key findings emerge on the TANF application data that States collect and maintain, including, for example:

- States frequently differ in how they count TANF application events. Differences across States in the minimum requirements for an application to be “filed,” as well as

¹ 54 States and territories were asked to participate in the survey of States. Four States did not respond: Montana, New York, Ohio, U.S. Virgin Islands.

differences in how they count TANF applications, seriously compromise the analysis of application data across States. Some of the biggest differences include, for example: whether States count individuals applying for other programs as TANF applicants; how States handle individuals returning to TANF after a recent case closing; and how States count applicants who withdraw their application before eligibility can be determined. More subtle inter-State differences in the meaning of a “filed application” arise when considering variations in the amount of effort and information required to file. For example, a small number of States have added pre-filing requirements since October 1996.

- Changes in how States count “applications approved” and “applications denied” since welfare reform also compromise the analysis of trends since AFDC within States. For example, as the types of assistance funded by the TANF block grant expanded, some States began to count applicants for benefits that do not become part of the ongoing TANF caseload count. These changes also confound attempts to understand the relationship between application events and the TANF caseload.
- The accuracy of data on reasons for application denial is particularly subject to doubt. States use a variety of codes and do not always use mutually exclusive categories. There is no reason to expect that TANF eligibility workers carefully and consistently code reasons for denial.
- Most States report making no or few changes since AFDC to their definitions of application events, suggesting that application data may be analyzed over time within most States.
- All but one of the States that offer cash diversion payments have collected some data on the number of cases receiving those payments. However, there is variation in how diversion cases are counted. For example, just under half of the States with diversion programs include diversion recipients in their denied cases; other States do not.
- Most States collected aggregate application data during the period when the Federal government did not require States to report the data (October 1996 through September 1999). However, about one-fourth of the States did not do so for some time during that period.
- Most States enter individual TANF application files on their automated administrative data systems and archive those files on a regular basis.

The key findings on TANF application and approved trends include:

- From FY1993 through FY1996, in the last years of the AFDC Program, applications and approvals declined. In the first year that States resumed reporting application data to the Federal government (FY2000), applications and approvals were at a lower level than in FY1996, but increased over the following next year.
- During the periods for which national application and approval data exist, approval rates declined about 4-5 points from FY1996 to FY2000. When observing 21 States for which

we have continuous application and approval data from FY1992 through FY2001, approval rates also declined, with the largest annual drop coming in FY1997, the first year of the TANF Program. It is tempting to interpret this decline as a result of TANF policy changes, giving its timing. Note, however, that concurrent changes in application and approval data definitions and conventions, as well as in the external social and economic environment, confound our ability to attribute all or part of the change in approval rates to changes in TANF policies in general, or to changes in application policies or processes, in particular.

This chapter examines in detail how States define and record application events, the implications for comparing data across States and over time, and describes what data on TANF applications States have available. The chapter also includes a section summarizing trends in applications and approvals since the end of the AFDC Program.

Definitions and Comparability of Data Across States

The discretion allowed States under the TANF Program provides for wide variation in State policies and procedures. Although States had some flexibility under AFDC, there was a greater likelihood that the application data in any particular State was fairly similar to that of other States for two key reasons. First, there was much less variation in basic AFDC policy across states. Second, States had been reporting AFDC data to the federal government for several decades, over which time certain conventions were adopted that assured greater similarity across States. Under PRWORA this may or may not be the case. States have great flexibility in designing the application process and in setting requirements that need to be completed before an application may be approved. In order to understand State TANF application data, it is important to examine information on how States define application events. Moreover, understanding the procedures States use as they collect and record the data is also important when determining its meaning and its comparability with data from other States. The data survey asked various questions about how States count applications filed, denied, and approved in their data systems. The survey also examined how these definitions have changed since the AFDC program. This section of the chapter presents the findings on definitions and comparability across States.

1. Applications Filed

A request for assistance is not administratively considered an application until it is “filed” or “received.” In most States, this starts the clock on the application-processing period in which eligibility must be determined. In addition, once an application is filed, many States require that it be given a final disposition, resulting in it being counted as approved or denied. The amount of information and number of activities required before applicants are able to file are important factors in understanding a State’s application process and what it means to file an application. For example, if individuals have pre-application requirements, some may decide not to apply at all.

Minimum Amount of Information Required

The minimum amount of information potential applicants need to provide on an application form before a TANF application can be considered filed varies across States. Exhibit 5.1 lists the number of States requiring particular types of information to be submitted before an application can be considered filed. Most States require both a name and address on the application, however, smaller

numbers of States also require more complete information before accepting the application in their data systems. According to the data survey, all States require applicants' names, while 90 percent (45 of 50) also require an address. Just over one-third of all surveyed States (17 States) require applicants to include Social Security numbers prior to filing. Information about family composition and the number and ages of children in the household are each required by 14 States. Seven States require reporting of family income, and five States require employment status. All States will eventually collect most of this information, but in terms of starting the process, one would expect that States that require less information may have more individuals filing for TANF. Appendix Exhibit E.1 displays the State-by-State levels of information required on an application.

Exhibit 5.1

Number of States Requiring Specific Information Before An Application Can Be Considered Filed

Type of Information	Number of States (n=50)
Name	50
Address	45
Social Security Number	17
Family Composition	14
Number/Ages of Children	14
Information About Household Members Not in the TANF Assistance Unit	3
Identify/Location of Absent Parent	4
Family Income	7
Employment Status	5
Work History	2
Education	2
Barriers to Work	1
Proof of Pregnancy, if relevant	1
Citizenship and Proof of Relationship	1

Source: 54-State Survey of State TANF Application Data Systems and Procedures

Actions Required for Filing an Application

States may require potential applicants to do more than just submit information to file an application; individuals may be required to engage in certain actions before they are considered TANF applicants. For example, States could add additional steps that result in some applicants never making it to official "filed" status, even though they initiated the application process. In other States, those same applicants may have their application filed immediately and not drop out until they are required to carry out the same step later in the process.

To understand the actions required by applicants before they file an application, the data survey asked States what specific actions applicants must take before a TANF application is considered received

and entered into the State data system as a filed application. As shown in Exhibit 5.2, States have differing levels of required activities.

Exhibit 5.2

Number of States Requiring Applicants To Take Particular Actions Before An Application Can Be Considered Filed

Action	Number of States (n=50)
Complete a Pre-Screening Interview	11
Attend An Orientation	2
Register With Employment Security	3
Complete An Employability Assessment	1
Cooperate With the Child Support Enforcement Agency	6
Explore Alternative Resources	1
Complete a Job Search or Job Search Training Workshop	1
Receive Information About Lump Sum Cash Payments or Vouchers	1
Complete An Eligibility Interview	11

Source: 54-State Survey of State TANF Application Data Systems and Procedures

In 11 States, applicants must complete a pre-application screening interview. This may involve a relatively brief interview with a receptionist or it may involve waiting and having a longer interview with other staff, but in any case it adds a step and may result in fewer filed applications. Eleven States also require applicants to complete a TANF eligibility interview before an application is considered filed. This practice may result in fewer filed applications. Individuals who are not sure whether they want to apply, or who are unable or unwilling to wait for an interview, may not be counted as applicants in these States. In addition, eligibility workers probably provide more information about programs and their requirements than receptionists or similar staff. Potential applicants may decide that TANF is not for them after meeting with an eligibility worker.

Cooperating with the Child Support Enforcement Agency is required in six States before a TANF application can be considered filed. In some cases, this requirement may simply involve signing or initialing a statement indicating a willingness to cooperate. However, local office staff frequently indicate that some applicants express a strong reluctance to working with child support enforcement agencies to receive benefits. Those individuals may decline to file an application. Appendix Exhibit E.2 provides a State-by-State listing of actions individuals must take before an application is considered filed.

State respondents were also asked whether the actions required to file an application changed after the implementation of PRWORA in October 1996. Only a small number of States have added additional requirements since that time that must be met prior to filing an application. These States are New Jersey, New Mexico, North Dakota, Puerto Rico, and Wisconsin. All of these States, except North Dakota, have added more than one additional step.

Other Factors Affecting Definition of a Filed Application

As summarized in Exhibit 5.3, States also differ in some respects on who is included in their counts of a filed application. For example, although most States count as applicants those who fail to submit all the materials required for eligibility and those who find a job that makes them ineligible before their application is approved, one State (Oregon) does not count either of these cases as

Exhibit 5.3

Summary of State Data Procedures Regarding Filed Applications

State Practice	Number of States (n=50)
Does not count applicants who fail to submit all the materials required for TANF eligibility to be determined in counts of filed TANF applications	1
Does not count applicants who find jobs before applications are approved, and whose income makes them ineligible for TANF assistance, in counts of filed TANF applications	1
Does not count applicants who withdraw their TANF applications before eligibility can be determined in counts of filed TANF applications	2
Includes applicants requesting other types of benefits besides TANF cash assistance in counts of filed TANF applications	19
Reports “a lot” of variation in actual practice of how applications are officially filed due to worker discretion or local office differences in operations	2

Source: 54-State Survey of State TANF Application Data Systems and Procedures

applicants. Additionally, Oregon and Guam are the only two States or territories that do not count applicants who withdraw their TANF applications before eligibility can be determined (see Appendix Exhibit E.3).

States vary in the way they determine which units are included in their counts of filed TANF applications. For example, some States also include applicants for non-TANF benefits. Nineteen States include individuals requesting other types of benefits in their counts of filed TANF applications. Twelve of these States include individuals receiving lump-sum payments or vouchers through a formal diversion program as filed applicants, while six States count individuals receiving TANF-funded childcare assistance. Applicants receiving TANF-funded transportation assistance benefits are included in the counts of filed applications in five States. Five States also report “other” types of benefits in counts of filed TANF applications. These other benefit programs include foster care allowances (Arizona), ancillary funds for training and employment (Guam), the food only portion of a general welfare program (Minnesota), Medicaid assistance (Nebraska), and case management services only (Wisconsin). Appendix Exhibit E.4 lists States and the programs that are included in their counts of filed applications. Including individuals applying for other programs in counts of TANF applications clearly increases the number of filed TANF applications relative to States that do not include such cases. More important, this practice confounds the analysis of trends over time, as many of the benefits counted in approvals were not counted, or did not exist, under AFDC.

Worker discretion, or local office differences in operations within States, may also affect the types of applicants counted as filed in State systems. For example, two States (Massachusetts and North Carolina) report wide variation in local office practice of how applications are officially filed (see Appendix Exhibit E.5). Eighteen States report some (i.e., “a little”) variation because of worker discretion or differences in local office operations. State respondents were also asked whether there are other reasons that local offices may not have all filed applications counted in the State data system. Oklahoma indicated that workers sometimes discuss basic eligibility factors with applicants and inform them if they do not meet a particular requirement. Applicants may withdraw their applications without signing in and thus will not be counted. West Virginia indicated that workers may fail to enter the case into the data system, and thus it will not be counted.

2. Applications Approved

Differences in State policy and practice may also lead to differences in the definition of applications approved. For example, States may differ in counting applicants who are approved for other TANF-related programs, or counting individuals returning to TANF after brief spells off of assistance. State TANF approval counts sometimes include individuals who are not receiving ongoing TANF cash assistance. As summarized in Exhibit 5.4, over one-third (19 of 50) of the States report including individuals approved for other types of benefits besides TANF cash assistance in their counts of approved TANF applications. Of these 19 States, six include individuals receiving formal diversion payments, four States include individuals receiving TANF-funded services (such as TANF-funded child care assistance, TANF-funded transportation assistance, or other TANF-funded benefits), and four States include households not receiving benefits because of immediate sanctions for failure to complete a work, or other behavioral, requirement. Thirteen States also approve and count households for TANF cash assistance if their benefit level is below \$10, even though these individuals are not issued a check (see Appendix Exhibit E.6).

States’ definitions of approved applications may also vary according to how States count participants who return to the program. Families receiving cash assistance often go on and off the program rapidly due to changes in income or failure to comply with program requirements. States were asked how they classify recent TANF leavers who reapply to the program. As summarized in Exhibit 5.4, 36 States report counting applicants whose cases were closed due to a sanction as approved, while 34 States count applicants returning after an administrative closing as approved applications (see Appendix Exhibit E.7). Of the states that exclude recent TANF leavers from their counts of approved applications, most do so for only one month after the case was closed. New Jersey’s policy on counting applicants returning to the program as approved applicants varies based on the type of sanction or the circumstances surrounding the administrative closing. Tennessee excludes from the application count cases closed due to an administrative closing for 40 days after the case is closed. Pennsylvania always excludes applicants returning from a sanction from their counts of approved applications, regardless of when the closing occurred.

Counting returning cases as approvals clearly adds to the total number of TANF cases approved, relative to States that exclude such cases in their counts of approvals. Including these types of cases in the count of approved applications yields approval rates that do not accurately represent the probability that the new applicants will be approved for TANF. States with more caseload “churning” due to administrative closings, errors, or sanctions, may appear to have higher approval rates because they count individuals returning to the program. Because States treat these cases

Exhibit 5.4**Summary of State Data Practices Regarding Approved Applications**

State Practice	Number of States
Includes applicants approved for other types of benefits besides TANF cash assistance in counts of approved TANF applications (n=50)	19
Includes cases closed due to a sanction who subsequently return to TANF as approved applications (n=45) ³	36
Includes cases closed due to an administrative closing who subsequently return to TANF as approved applications (n=50)	34
Reports reasons that some local offices may be unable to have all reported TANF applications counted in the state data system (n=50)	0

Source: 54-State Survey of State TANF Application Data Systems and Procedures

³ CA, DC, MO, NH and RI did not answer the question because they do not close entire cases due to sanctions.

differently and because sanction policies and errors are likely to vary across States, the comparability of data across States is open to question.

Six States report other factors that need to be considered when interpreting their data counts on approved applications. For example, two States (Arkansas and Indiana) report changes in their programmatic or data system structures resulting in large jumps in approved applications during the month of transition when all cases were brought into the new system. Also, cases closed due to employment in Missouri are treated as open TANF cases while receiving transitional Medicaid. If cases are reopened for cash assistance during this time period, they do not count as approved applications. Connecticut counts individuals who hit the State 21-month time limit and reapply for benefits under stricter eligibility criteria. These factors are shown in detail in Appendix Exhibit E.8. No States reported any reasons that local offices may be unable to have all reported TANF applications counted as approved in the State data systems.

3. Applications Denied

The number of denied applications is intended to count TANF applicants not approved for benefits. However, State counts of denied applications may vary according to who is included in their counts of applicants and denied applicants. As application activities and requirements differ across States, the way States count applicants and those who are not certified may influence approval rates and how they should be interpreted.

Data Definitions

Most States are consistent regarding their procedures for counting denied applications, even though they differ on who is counted as an applicant. The one exception, as shown in Exhibit 5.5, is that eight States exclude their counts of denied cases applicants who withdraw their application. Under AFDC, DHHS used to request a count of withdrawn applications, but this is not the case under TANF. Therefore, these cases are not being counted in the application data for these States.

There are important similarities and differences in the ways States use data definitions. For example, all States include applicants who fail to submit all materials that are required to determine eligibility

in their counts of denied applicants. Florida and Maryland do not include individuals who fail to show up for an eligibility interview. South Dakota does not include those who find a job and become ineligible during the application period. Additionally, three States do not include in their counts of denied applications those applicants approved for other types of assistance, but not for TANF assistance. A State-by-State listing is provided in Appendix Exhibit E.9.

Exhibit 5.5

Summary of State Data Procedures Regarding Denied Applications

State Procedure	Number of States (n=50)
Does not include applicants who fail to submit all the materials required for TANF eligibility to be determined in State counts of denied applications	0
Does not include applicants who fail to show up for an eligibility interview in State counts of denied applications	2
Does not include applicants who find jobs before their applications can be approved and whose income makes them ineligible for TANF assistance in State counts of denied applications	1
Does not include applicants who withdraw their applications in State counts of denied applications	8
Does not include applicants approved for other types of assistance, but not for TANF assistance, in State counts of denied TANF applications	3
Reports reasons that some local offices may be unable to have all denied TANF applications counted in State data systems	1
Reports other circumstances where applicants would file a TANF application, not receive TANF assistance, and not be counted in State systems as a denied TANF application	3

Source: 54-State Survey of State TANF Application Data Systems and Procedures

States were also asked about other factors that need to be taken into account when interpreting their data on denied applications. Connecticut mentioned that when individuals reapply for TANF after their time limit expires, they are subject to stricter eligibility criteria. Nevada indicated it changed the way it counts denials when it switched to a new data system. Washington mentioned that ineligible applicants may be screened out before they submit an application, because staff ask screening questions or a trial eligibility calculator. They noted that this reduces the number of denials due to ineligibility. Appendix Exhibit E.10 lists these States and the factors they described.

Diversion Payment Cases

As discussed above in Chapter Two, potential applicants may be diverted from ongoing TANF assistance through a formal payment diversion program. Survey results show mixed methods of counting diversion payment cases across States. About half of the States with diversion programs (12 of 25) include diversion recipients in their counts of denied cases. The rest of the States do not count them as denied. Appendix Exhibit E.11 lists the States with diversion programs and indicates whether or not applicants who accept diversion are counted as denied applicants.

4. Reasons for Denial

The study also collected information on how States enter reasons for application denials. The survey included questions about how denial codes are input into the State data system. There are a number of different ways denial reasons can be entered. A worker may have to enter a specific code in order to deny an application. Reasons for denial may also be the result of a computer system automatically assigning a code based on other case actions. Half of the States surveyed have workers directly enter a code, in 11 States the computer assigns a code, and in 14 States both methods are used depending on the circumstances. Appendix Exhibit E.12 provides a State-by-State listing of the methods used.

States that require workers to enter denial codes were asked what happens if a worker does not provide a code. The most common answer, given in 24 States, is that cases are left pending. Eleven States report that an automatic code is assigned based on other information entered about the case. Only five States report that the case would be given a “missing” code for reason for denial. Each State respondent was also asked whether any reasons for denial are under- or over-reported. Thirteen States said that some reasons are under- or over-reported. In States where workers enter denial codes, some States report overuse of generic denial codes relative to more specific codes. Additionally, some States report glitches in their computer systems resulting in incorrect automatic denial codes assigned to cases. New Jersey reported that some counties do not enter TANF cases in the database until applicants submit all required verification. Therefore, cases denied may be under-reported since the system does not capture some ineligible cases that are never entered into the system. State answers to the questions about procedures for denial codes when workers do not enter a code and under or over reporting of codes are shown in Appendix Exhibit E.13.

In addition to information on how denial data are entered, States provided lists of the categories they use and information on how particular types of denials are categorized. Some important findings include:

- Most States have ambiguous categories in their lists of reasons for denial. The categories frequently do not appear to be mutually exclusive, and it is easy to see how different categories might be used for the same type of case.
- States were asked to indicate how certain types of cases would be coded. For example, States were asked how individuals who fail to complete a job search or an orientation requirement would be coded. Many times multiple codes were listed for a single reason for denial. Most of the time States would list the same code under multiple reasons for denial. Often, the same category appears to fit multiple types of denials.

These findings call into question the usefulness of denial data, and suggest that much work would be required to make them more reliable if the requirement to report them was reinstated. The Federal government could specify a small number of specific categories and request States to report on them. Even if States could change their administration to accommodate the new denial codes, however, there is no guarantee that workers will use the codes consistently and correctly.

Changes in Data Definitions After PRWORA

State respondents were also asked whether they made any changes since PRWORA to their definitions of filed applications, approvals, or denials.² Exhibit 5.6 shows that very few States reported changes in each of these categories. Three States (Minnesota, North Dakota, and Wisconsin) report using a different definition of what constitutes a filed TANF application compared to what constituted a filed application under the AFDC program. Minnesota had previously provided estimates of filed cases, North Dakota indicated that the steps they added constitute a different definition, and Wisconsin now excludes child-only cases from their count. Two States reported differences in their definition of approved TANF applications. Minnesota previously reported estimates of approvals, and Oregon no longer collects the data. Two States report changes in the definition of denied applications. Oregon does not collect the data, and denials in Wisconsin include individuals who are eligible for case management services but decline assistance. The cases noted in Wisconsin meet the financial eligibility standards for TANF, but are not eligible because they are considered job-ready.

Exhibit 5.6

Number of States Making Changes to State Definitions of Filed, Approved, or Denied Applications Since October 1996 (n=50)

Changes Made to State Data Definitions	Number of States Making Changes Since October 1996
<i>Filed Applications</i>	
State definition of what constitutes a filed TANF application compared to what constituted a received AFDC application	3
<i>Approved Applications</i>	
State definition of what constitutes an approved TANF application compared to what constituted an approved AFDC application	2
<i>Denied Applications</i>	
State definition of what constitutes a denied TANF application compared to what constituted a denied AFDC application	2

Source: 54-State Survey of State TANF Application Data Systems and Procedures

Data Collected by States

Application Data Collected by States

As shown in Exhibit 5.7, most States report that they continued to collect basic application data between October 1996 and 1999, when they were not required to report the data to the Federal government. However, about one-quarter of the States did not collect data at some point during this “blackout” period.

² Note that this item refers to the actions taken for an application to be filed, approved, or denied. It does not refer to the types of services or benefits counted as TANF applications. This information is summarized above in Exhibit 5.3.

- Thirty-seven States collected data on applications filed between October 1996 and 1999, when Federal data reporting requirements were resumed. Twelve States collected data on filed applications during some of this period and only Oregon did not collect data at all during this time period. This information is presented by State in Appendix Exhibit E.14.
- Thirty-six States collected data on approved and denied applications during the blackout period. Thirteen States collected the data for part of the period, and Oregon did not collect the data. Appendix Exhibits E.15 and E.16 list the States and the data they collected.

Exhibit 5.7

Summary of the Data Collected by State During the Relevant Time Period

Type of Data	Period When Federal Government Did Not Require Data to Be Collected	Number of States With Data Collected (n=50)		
		Entire Period of Time	Some of the Time	No Data Collected
Filed Applications	October 1996-September 1999	37	12	1
Approved Applications	October 1996-September 1999	36	13	1
Denied Applications	October 1996-September 1999	36	13	1
Reasons for Denial	October 1996-Present	37	9	4

Source: 54-State Survey of State TANF Application Data Systems and Procedures

As noted earlier, States are not currently required to collect and report data on reasons for applicant denials. The survey included questions on what denial data States are collecting. The period of interest for these data is from October 1996 to the present.

- Despite the removal of reasons for denial as a Federal reporting requirement in October 1996, many States continued to collect these data. Thirty-seven States reported collecting denial data continuously since October 1996. Nine States only collected these data part of the time since October 1996, and four States indicated that they did not collect them at all after October 1996 (see Appendix Exhibit E.17).

Available Application Data Reports

The availability of application data is a critical factor when considering whether it would be possible to analyze trends in application data during the blackout period. However, there is also a question about the accessibility of the data. In the data survey, States were asked what application data they had available in reports. Exhibit 5.8 shows the number of States that reported data are available in existing reports.

- Thirty-two of the 37 States that collected data on filed applications during the blackout period indicated that the data were compiled in reports. However, six States indicated

that the reports have been discarded (see Appendix Exhibit E.14 for a State-by-State listing).

- Thirty-one of the 36 States that collected data on approved applications have reports for the entire blackout period. Thirteen States have no reports for this period (see Appendix Exhibit E.15).
- For the number of denied applications, 32 States have reports for the whole period and 13 have no reports. The remaining five States have reports for part of the period (see Appendix Exhibit E.16).
- About the same number of States have collected continuously data on the number of filed, approved, or denied applications, and the reasons for denial. However, fewer States that collected data on reasons for denial have published these data in reports. Only 21 States have data reports on reasons for denial for the entire period from October 1996 to the present. Fifteen States have no data reports available on reasons for denial (see Appendix Exhibit E.17).

Exhibit 5.8

Summary of the Availability of Existing State Data Reports By Relevant Time Period

Type of Data	Relevant Time Period	Number of States With Existing Data Reports Available (n=50)		
		Entire Period of Time	Some of the Time	No Reports Available
Filed Applications	October 1996-September 1999	32	7	11
Approved Applications	October 1996-September 1999	31	6	13
Denied Applications	October 1996-September 1999	32	5	13
Reasons for Denial	October 1996-Present	21	14	15

Source: 54-State Survey of State TANF Application Data Systems and Procedures

Although a fairly large number of States reported having application data available for the blackout period, not all of those States were able to produce reports when asked. Some of the States said the reports were no longer available. Other State respondents indicated that the reports they described were not publications, but instead required special runs to be generated from the State computer systems.

Diversion Payments Data

As noted earlier, States have never been required to collect data on TANF diversion payments. States that implemented diversion policies were asked whether they were collecting data on the number of diversion payment recipients. Exhibit 5.9 shows when each State began collecting data on diversion and whether they have collected data continuously since then.

Exhibit 5.9**Availability of State Data Reports on TANF Diversion Payments Since the State Implemented Diversion (Among States That Offer Diversion Payments, n=25)**

State	Date Started Collecting Data on TANF Diversion Payments	Data Reports Available		
		Entire Period of Time	Some of the Time	No Reports Available
Alaska	July 1998	✓		
Arizona	April 2000	✓		
Arkansas	July 1997	✓		
California	February 1998		✓	
Colorado	July 1997	✓		
Connecticut	December 1998	✓		
Delaware	October 1999	✓		
District of Columbia	March 1999	✓		
Florida	July 1998	✓		
Idaho	July 1997	✓		
Iowa	October 1997	✓		
Kentucky	June 1999	✓		
Maine	September 1997	✓		
Maryland	October 1996	✓		
Minnesota	January 1998	✓		
New Jersey	^a		✓	
New Mexico	February 2000	✓		
North Carolina	October 1996	✓		
Oklahoma	November 1999	✓		
South Dakota	December 1996			✓
Texas	November 1997	✓		
Utah	May 1997	✓		
Virginia	October 1996	✓		
Washington	November 1997		✓	
West Virginia	January 1997		✓	
Total	25	20	4	1

^a: The date is unknown as data is compiled by outside vendor.

Source: 54-State Survey of State TANF Application Data Systems and Procedures

Of the 25 States with formal payment diversion programs, 20 have diversion data available for the entire period of time, while four States have data available for some of the time period and South Dakota does not have any diversion data available.

Availability of TANF Application Data in Automated Systems

In a supplemental survey of the 50 States that completed the initial Survey of States, State respondents were asked several questions about the availability of application files in State automated administrative data systems; 45 States responded.³ While the extent of individual application data available in State automated administrative data systems varies, most States have current and past data available, either on the system or in archived files.

With the exception of Maine, all the States responded that they enter application data into an automated administrative data system at some point in the application process. Maine is currently implementing an automated data system. As shown in Exhibit 5.10, all of the other 44 States in the survey enter information on approved TANF applications and 42 of them also include denied TANF applications in their automated systems. Most of the States (36) have both the most recent application and past application information available in their administrative data systems, while 7 States have only the most recent application information available. Appendix Exhibit E.18 presents State-by-State information on the availability of application records in automated administrative data systems.

Exhibit 5.10

State Practices for Application Records in States Automated Administration Data Systems (n=45)

State Practice	Number of States (n=45)
States with approved TANF application files available in their systems	44
States with denied TANF application files available in their systems	42
States that have most recent and past application files available in their systems	36
States that only have most recent application information available	7
States that archive individual application records on a regular basis	26

Source: Supplemental Survey on Individual Application Data in Automated Administrative Data Systems

As shown in Appendix Exhibit E.19 the length of time that application records are available in automated systems varies widely across States. The time period records are available ranges from two months in Illinois to indefinitely in 13 other States. It should be noted that 4 of the 13 States where records are available indefinitely remarked that they recently implemented a new administrative data system. Even when records are not currently available they may be available in automated data archives. Twenty-six States report that they archive individual application records on a regular basis. The timing of archiving ranges from every day in Michigan to 31 months in Massachusetts.

³ The supplemental survey is included as Appendix F.

The supplemental survey also asked States how they compile the data they report to the Federal government on TANF approvals, denials, and total applications. All but 1 of the 45 States that responded to the survey indicated that these data are compiled from the State's automated system. Maine is in the process of its initial implementation of an automated data system. Currently, local offices enter the numbers into an automated reporting form and the State office compiles the numbers and produces the Federal reports.

Adjustments Made to TANF Data Prior to Submission to the Federal Government

State respondents were asked whether they make any adjustments to their application data before they are submitted to DHHS. Only two States reported making any adjustments. Maryland indicated that it adjusts the data to make them consistent with TANF caseload data. To do this, Maryland does not count cases whose assistance is provided through a separate State-funded program. Texas adjusts the data because the time period covered in State reports differs from the time period they must use for data submitted to DHHS.

How States Use TANF Application Data

Eighty percent of States responding (40 States) report that they use the TANF application data to make program decisions. Most of the remaining States mentioned that they only collect data because of the DHHS requirement to do so. The most common use of TANF application data is to measure local office workloads (33 States). Twenty-three States reported using the data for quality assurance and the same number report they use them for local office performance measures. Eighteen States use the data for determining funding allocations. Thirteen States report that they use the data for other purposes. These include budget development, caseload monitoring, public relations, caseload projections, and assessing timeliness. Oklahoma is the only State that reports it uses the data to determine the impact of policy changes on certification and denial rates. Appendix Exhibit E.20 provides a State-by-State list of the ways States use their application data.

Trends in TANF Applications and Approvals

Part of the rationale for the Survey of State TANF Application Data Systems and Procedures is to understand whether interstate differences, as well as changes over time, in the definitions and method of counting "applications filed," "applications approved," and "applications denied," compromise attempts to analyze trends using State-provided, aggregate data on applications and approvals. In fact, as discussed above, the study found many differences across States and over time in application data definitions and procedures, which may confound our understanding of what behavior actually lies behind observed trends. Moreover, because many States now include in their counts of approvals TANF-funded benefits and services that may not be counted as part of the ongoing TANF caseload, the relationship between approvals, case closings, and caseload trends may be less direct under TANF.

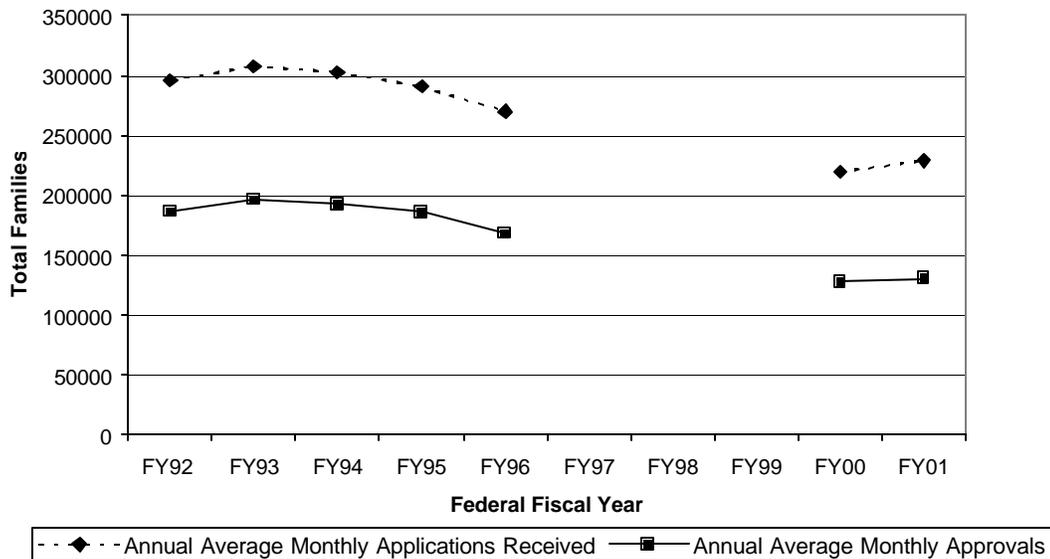
This section presents national trends in TANF applications and approvals in the context of information from the Survey of State TANF Application Data Systems and Procedures.

National Trends in AFDC and TANF Applications and Approvals

Exhibit 5.11 presents graphically national trends in AFDC and TANF applications since Federal fiscal year (FY)1992 (10/91–9/92).⁴ Note that application data are missing for FY1997 -1999, the

Exhibit 5.11

National Annual Average AFDC and TANF Monthly Applications and Approvals, FFY1992-2001 (N=48 States)



years during which States were not required to report TANF application data to the Federal government. As shown on Exhibit 5.11, applications and approvals decline from FY1993 through FY1996, the three years before national welfare reform, when many States had already implemented some of their own welfare reform provisions and when the economy began its steady period of decade-long growth. Applications and approvals were at a far lower level in FY2000 than in FY1996, but increased from FY2000 to FY2001.

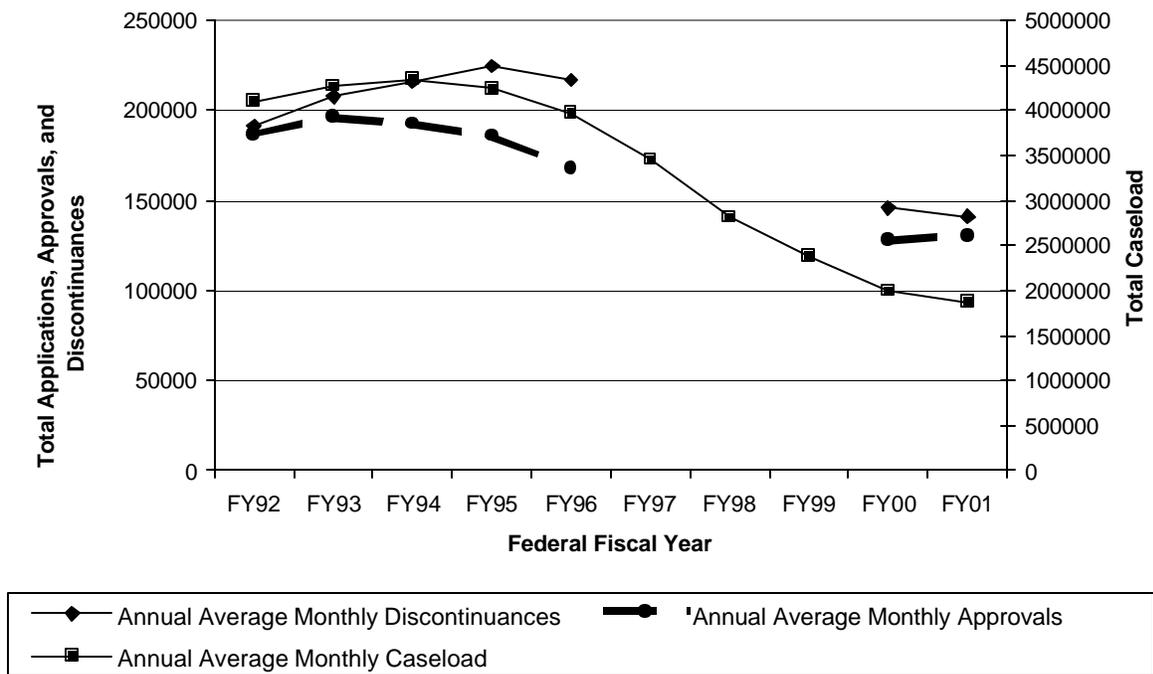
Applications and approvals display a roughly parallel trend over the years, indicating that approval rates did not change much during this time. In fact, from FY1992 to FY1996, approval rates ranged from 62.1 to 63.8 percent, and declined about 4-5 percentage points from that range in FY2000 and FY2001. Due to the many changes in application processes, policies, definitions, and statistical practices, we cannot be sure that the two sets of approval rates measure equivalent outcomes over the entire observation period.

⁴ The exhibit uses data from 48 States and territories that have complete applications, approvals, and caseload data for the Federal fiscal years 1992–1996 and 2000–2001. Excluded are: Florida, Ohio, Tennessee, Indiana, New Hampshire, and Guam. Data source: Administration for Children and Families, DHHS.

Exhibit 5.12 plots approvals against AFDC and TANF caseloads and case closings. In general, one would expect caseloads to decline during periods in which case closings (“discontinuances” during the AFDC Program) are at a higher level than approvals. During the AFDC period included in the Exhibit, this relationship is in fact not strictly observed (for example, from FY1992 to FY1994, caseloads continued to rise, while discontinuances were at higher levels than approvals). This may be due to the fact that administrative case closings that soon reopened may have been counted as discontinuances but may not have been subtracted from the caseload counts.

Exhibit 5.12

National Average Monthly Caseload, Approvals, and Case Closings (N=48 States)



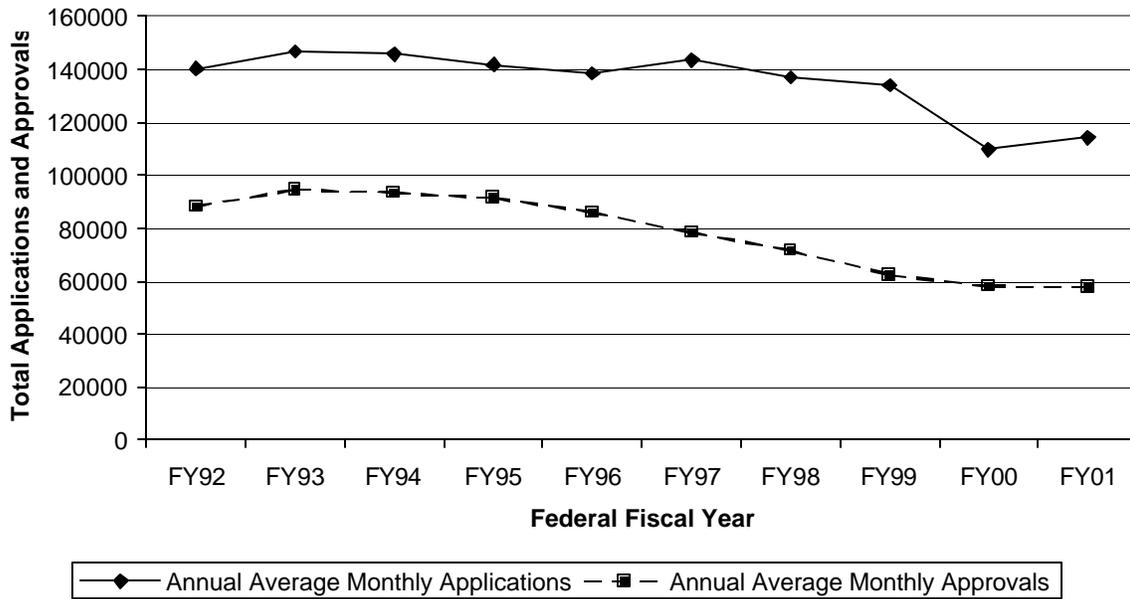
For the two TANF years for which we have national approval and case closings data, however, the expected relationship holds—case closings are greater than approvals *and* the caseload continued to decline. The interpretation of this relationship is clouded, however, by the fact that by this time many States were counting as “approvals” TANF-funded benefits and services that may not have been counted as part of the TANF caseload.

The Survey of State TANF Application Data Systems and Procedures requested application and approval data from States that continued to collect and maintain them during the blackout period. Twenty-one States were able to provide those data, which are presented in Exhibit 5.13.⁵

⁵ The 21 States are: Alaska, Arizona, Connecticut, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Kansas, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Mexico, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Texas, and Utah.

Exhibit 5.13

Annual Average Monthly Applications and Approvals for States with Continuous Data (N=21 States)



As the Exhibit shows, applications declined relatively slowly from FY1993 through FY2001, with some years of slight increases. On the other hand, approvals declined steadily, reflecting both lower levels of applicants, as well as lower approval rates. In fact, as Exhibit 5.14 shows, approval rates dropped from a range of about 62 percent to 64 percent from FY1992 to FY1996 to a lower range of about 47 percent to 55 percent from FY1997 to FY2001. Again, it is tempting to interpret this decline as a result of TANF policy changes, given its timing. Note, however, that concurrent changes in application and approval data definitions and conventions, as well as in the external social and economic environment, confound our ability to attribute all or part of the change in approval rates to changes in welfare reform policies, in general, and to changes in application policies or processes, in particular.

Exhibit 5.14

AFDC and TANF Application Approval Rates in States With Continuous Data (N = 21 States)

	FY1992	FY1993	FY1994	FY1995	FY1996	FY1997	FY1998	FY1999	FY2000	FY2001
AFDC/ TANF Approval Rate	62.8%	64.4%	64.1%	64.3%	61.9%	54.6%	52.3%	46.5%	52.8%	50.6%

Chapter Six:

Concluding Observations of the Survey of States

The Survey of States was designed to address several of the major research objectives of the Study of the TANF Application Process. This chapter reviews each objective and summarizes the findings reported in earlier chapters of this section of the report.

What are the official State-level application policies and procedures for TANF cash assistance and how have they changed the nature of the application process since the end of the AFDC Program?

The implementation of national welfare reform has added to the content and structure of applications for cash assistance in most States, while maintaining most of the core informational requirements of the AFDC application process. Many States had already made changes before the implementation of TANF in the context of State-initiated welfare reform efforts. For example, about half of the study States that introduced an employability assessment or a job search requirement did so prior to the passage of PRWORA in 1996.

The major changes in TANF application policies and procedures reflect overall policy emphases on developing economic independence and encouraging personal and parental responsibility. For example, as mentioned above, many States introduced an employability assessment or job search requirement for applicants. These requirements reinforce the notion that cash assistance should be a temporary transition to economic independence. They also help prepare potential clients for rapid compliance with ongoing behavioral requirements. New requirements emphasizing parental responsibility include, for example, cooperation with child support enforcement efforts during the application period, documenting children's satisfactory school attendance, and documenting children's up-to-date immunization records.

In addition to adding or changing applicant behavioral and verification requirements, States have also added and changed informational requirements. For example, some States have introduced pre-application screening forms and interviews focused on employability and employment issues, and on other social service or health needs. Pre-application screening may result in potential TANF applicants deciding not to apply, or in applicants withdrawing TANF applications.

Although many States have added behavioral, verification, and informational requirements, failure to comply with some application requirements does not always result in a denial of benefits. This is an important detail when assessing the degree to which new requirements may represent an additional barrier for applicants. In many instances, however, the missing requirement may result in an immediate grant reduction until clients comply.

Finally, many States have taken advantage of the ability to offer potential TANF applicants lump sum payments or vouchers to meet immediate needs in lieu of ongoing cash assistance. Most States that have introduced diversion payments limit eligibility to a narrow group of applicants. Few States require TANF applicants to explore alternative resources or services as a benefit diversion policy.

How does the TANF intake and application process operate in selected local TANF Program offices and how has it changed since the end of the AFDC Program?

Welfare reform has changed the application process in most of the 11 local offices selected for the study. In concert with changes in State application policies, the study offices have added specific activities or steps in the application process. For example, many local offices have added applicant meetings with additional staff, such as program orientations, pre-application screenings, or employability assessments. Offices have also added requirements to meet with staff from other agencies, including, for example, child support enforcement and employment security agencies.

Most local welfare offices in the study have increased the types and amount of information exchanged between applicants and agency staff. For example, in some offices that have not implemented formal program orientation sessions, eligibility workers are now responsible for providing applicants with more extensive information about program and work requirements. Moreover, office staff also ask prospective applicants or applicants for more information about themselves and family members, often as part of emphasizing personal and parental responsibility.

What is the qualitative evidence concerning the impact of changes in the application process on application decisions?

The key changes to the application process noted across offices were an increase in the amount of information staff provide to individuals, and the increased availability of support services during the application period. Most staff from the local welfare offices in the study did not feel that changes made in the application process had significantly affected the willingness of individuals to apply or to complete the application process. General program requirements and increased employment opportunities outside of TANF were cited as more likely to influence application decisions. An important exception is the Dane County, Wisconsin office, in which informants felt that application policies have also influenced the decision to apply for TANF.

What are the content, quality, and format of data that States collect and maintain on applications, approvals, denials, and diverted applicants?

Most States collected TANF application data during the period when the Federal government did not require application data to be reported (October 1996 through September 1999). However, about one-fourth of the States did not collect application data for some time during that period. Moreover, many States do not now have the data in readily available reports or files.

Data on reasons for application denials continue to be used in most States, although their accuracy is particularly subject to doubt. States use a variety of codes and do not always use mutually exclusive categories. Based on respondent comments, there is no reason to expect that TANF eligibility workers carefully and consistently code reasons for denial.

All but one of the States that offer cash diversion payments have collected some data on the number of cases receiving those payments. However, there is variation in how diversion cases are counted. For example, just under half of the States with diversion programs include diverted recipients in their denied cases; other States do not.

Most States enter individual TANF application files on their administrative data systems and archive those files on a regular basis.

What are the implications of State-by-State differences in the definition and measurement of “application,” “approval,” “denial,” and “diversion,” for the interpretation and comparability of data documenting these events? How comparable are trends in applications and approvals over time and across States?

States often differ on how they define and count TANF application events. Some of the biggest differences include, for example: whether States count individuals applying for other programs as TANF applicants; how States handle individuals returning to TANF after a recent case closing; and how States count applicants who withdraw their application before eligibility can be determined. These inter-State differences can affect the comparability of application levels and approval rates across States. More subtle inter-State differences in the meaning of a “filed application” arise when considering variations in the amount of effort and information required to file.

Moreover, many States have also changed the events that count as “applications approved” and “applications denied.” For example, as the types of benefits funded by the TANF block grant have expanded, many States include counts of applications for benefits other than ongoing TANF cash assistance in their data on applications. These changes also compromise the analysis of trends in applications and approvals since AFDC within States.

How have the numbers of applications filed and approved changed since the end of AFDC?

From FY1996, the last year of the AFDC Program, to FY2000, the first year in which national TANF application data are available, applications filed dropped about 19 percent, and approvals dropped about 24 percent. Also, approval rates dropped by about 4-5 percentage points over this period. When observing 21 States for which we have continuous application and approval data from FY1992 through FY2001, approval rates also declined, with the largest annual dip coming in FY1997, the first year of the TANF Program. It is tempting to interpret this decline as a result of TANF policy changes, given its timing. However, concurrent changes in application and approval data definitions and conventions, as well as in the external social and economic environment, confound our ability to attribute all or part of the change in approval rates to changes in TANF policies in general, or to changes in application policies or processes, in particular.

The findings from the Survey of States suggest that although application policies and procedures have changed under TANF, those changes by themselves may not have affected the application decision any more than general TANF policies or external factors, such as the labor market for entry-level and lower-skilled workers and changes in attitudes and expectations about single mothers leaving home for the workplace. With some exceptions, most local welfare office management and staff in our study felt this to be the case.

Macro-level quantitative evidence about the possible impact of changes in overall TANF policy and in the application process on the application decision is also not conclusive. National and State-level data on changes in applications and approvals show overall trends similar to changes in caseload levels since the end of the AFDC Program, but by themselves offer no strong evidence about the

independent impact of changes in TANF policy in general, or in application policies and procedures in particular, on the application decision.

The Case Study component of the Study of the TANF Application Process is designed to develop micro-level data on application decisions, experiences, and results. The Case Studies survey a sample of potential and actual applicants in six local welfare offices about their economic and family status, application experiences, and reasons for their application decisions. Moreover, the Case Studies include case record reviews for the TANF applicants in each local welfare office research sample. The case record reviews are designed to measure how far each applicant went in the process and, for those who were denied assistance, the reason for denial. While the Case Studies are not designed to estimate directly the impact of changes under TANF on the application decision, they will allow insight into the degree that application activities and requirements introduced under welfare reform may influence individuals in filing and completing an application.

Section II: Findings from the Case Studies

Chapter Seven: The TANF Application Process and Results in Mercer County, New Jersey

Overview and Context

New Jersey's TANF Program is known as Work First New Jersey (WFNJ). From 1992 to 1997, New Jersey implemented a welfare reform waiver program called the Family Development Program (FDP). Compared to the FDP, which emphasized education and training, WFNJ includes tighter behavioral requirements with a strong work-first focus.¹ In addition, WFNJ limits the maximum lifetime cash assistance eligibility to 60 months.²

Exhibit 7.1

Overview of Work First New Jersey Provisions^a

<i>Time Limit</i>	Lifetime limit of 60 months
<i>Time Limit Exemptions or Extensions</i>	Exemptions for parents or caretakers older than 60, disabled or ill parents or caretakers, or victims of domestic violence
<i>Family Cap Provision</i>	No additional benefits for any children born after parents have received assistance for at least 10 months
<i>Work Requirements</i>	Participants are required to engage in work activities as soon as possible but no later than 24 months after first receiving assistance
<i>Work Activities</i>	Single and two-parent families both required to participate in work activities for 35 hours each week
<i>Work Activity Exemptions and Deferrals</i>	Exemption or deferral for recipient older than 60; recipient with a mental or physical disability; recipient caring for a disabled family member; victim of domestic violence; youngest child is less than 3 months old; recipient is chronically unemployable; child care is unavailable; in later stages of pregnancy
<i>Earned Income Disregard</i>	Earnings from first full month of employment are disregarded in benefit calculation; half of monthly earnings after the first month are disregarded in benefit calculation

^a Policies prevailing at the time a sample was drawn for the study (9/01–2/02).

¹ Koralek, R., and N. Pindus, J. Capizzano, R. Bess. "Recent Changes in New Jersey Welfare and Work, Child Care, and Child Welfare Systems." Assessing the New Federalism; The Urban Institute. State Update No. 7, August 2001.

² Certain criteria determine eligibility for exemptions from the lifetime limit, including the age of the parent, disability or illness of a parent, caring for a disabled person, domestic violence, and chronic unemployability, which is defined as having multiple barriers documented over an extended period of time. Furthermore, certain individuals may be eligible for extensions to the limit, including cases where a recipient or recipient's children would suffer extreme hardship or incapacity in the event of benefit termination.

WFNJ participants are expected to take part in work activities while they are receiving benefits. Participants must be engaged in an approved work activity as soon as possible, but no later than 24 months after starting assistance. Activities that count towards the work requirement include, for example: unsubsidized employment, on-the-job training, job search or job readiness activities (for a maximum of six weeks), community service, and education or training directly related to employment. English as a Second Language classes and substance abuse treatment are also allowable work activities under WFNJ. Post-secondary education is limited to 24 months, and vocational education is capped at 12 months. Similar to the time limit provisions, certain individuals may be exempt from work requirements if they meet certain criteria.³ For non-exempt individuals, both single-parent families and two-parent families receiving WFNJ are required to participate in work activities for 35 hours each week.

Families who participate in WFNJ do not receive additional TANF assistance for any children born 10 months or more after they enroll in the program. Those children may, however, be eligible for other assistance programs such as Food Stamps and Medicaid. WFNJ also includes earned income disregard provisions that enable participants to keep their whole public assistance grant during their first full month of employment. After that, half of the earnings of employed participants who remain eligible for cash assistance are included when calculating their WFNJ benefits.

Application Process

The following section provides an overview of the TANF application process at the Mercer County Board of Social Services office, located in Trenton, and is followed by more detailed descriptions of each application step. It is based largely on a research visit made in September 2001.

Summary

Mercer County's TANF application process includes the opportunity for a form of diversionary assistance and includes a work-related behavioral requirement. Applicants do not receive extensive detailed information regarding program expectations and policies during the application process.⁴ Much of this information is conveyed to them once they are certified.

On their first visit to the office, individuals are directed to the Help Desk where staff conduct a basic screening. This screening includes: an assessment of potential program eligibility, an electronic search for current and previous program participation, and a very brief overview of application requirements, including the necessity to comply with child support. During this initial visit, individuals sign an application form and schedule an intake interview. Once they sign the form, they are considered applicants.

³ Individuals who may defer or be exempt from work activities include those recipients over 60 years, recipients with mental or physical disabilities, victims of domestic violence, parents with children younger than three months, or chronically unemployable individuals who provide full time care of their child or dependent.

⁴ That is, there is no formal orientation session or informational interview about TANF. However, workers do provide basic program information and answer any program related questions applicants may have.

Individuals may also phone in their screening information and schedule an intake appointment. Although those individuals do not sign the application sheet until they visit the office for their intake appointment, they are considered applicants from the day that they first contact the Help Desk by telephone. According to office staff, these individuals are the most likely to drop out of the application process between initial inquiry and the intake interview.

During the intake interview, individuals provide personal information and receive a basic overview of the program. Individuals who apply for TANF meet with an eligibility worker. Unless applicants need to submit additional application information to the eligibility worker, they may not meet again with the worker until their case has been approved. Individuals who are referred to New Jersey's formal TANF diversion program, the Early Employment Initiative (EEI), are no longer considered active TANF applicants unless EEI staff conclude that they are not work-ready and enroll them directly in TANF if they are otherwise eligible.

Help Desk

Visitors to the Mercer County Board of Social Services enter the building and immediately proceed through a metal detector. The main lobby has rows of chairs to accommodate individuals waiting for their appointments. In front of the chairs is a long counter staffed by three workers who call individuals' names when their appointment is ready to begin. To the left of the chairs is a Help Desk staffed by several individuals. Informational brochures are available in several locations throughout the lobby.

Visitors who are not currently clients and who are seeking information about applying for assistance programs are directed to the Help Desk upon entering the agency building. Help Desk staff ask potential applicants about their circumstances and living situation to determine quickly the assistance programs for which they may be eligible. Immediate needs may qualify them for expedited TANF, General Assistance (GA), Food Stamps (FS), or Medicaid. Typical circumstances that would qualify an individual for immediate services include homelessness, an emergency medical situation, or domestic violence.

After individuals have provided general information about their circumstances and living situation, they complete a screening form with Help Desk staff. This form is available in both electronic and hard copy and collects more specific information about individuals' identity and circumstances, including, for example: Social Security Number, residence, living situation, marital status, and income amounts and sources. The Help Desk staff enter this information manually or electronically; if manually, they enter it electronically shortly after the inquiry.

Using the identification information on the screening form, Help Desk staff run an automated search to determine individuals' program history and current participation status. The result of the search affects the next steps. Individuals whose TANF cases have closed within 30 days are directed to their previous eligibility worker—they do not have to begin the application process anew. Individuals who have not received TANF in the past month are asked to fill out and sign the first page of the unified application form, which includes TANF, Food Stamps, and Medicaid, and schedule an appointment for an intake interview (typically for within two days of their application date). After the sheet is signed, an application is formally filed, and the applicant and agency have 30 days to determine eligibility for TANF and other relevant benefit programs.

During the Help Desk screening, staff briefly explain the necessity to cooperate with child support enforcement and explain that TANF benefits are contingent upon fulfilling work requirements. This overview is typically very brief. If individuals ask for more information they can learn about the behavioral requirements of the program, but more detailed information is not consistently offered at this point to all potential applicants. Help desk staff also hand applicants a list of necessary documents and verifications to bring to the intake interview.

Prospective applicants may also contact the agency and begin the application process by telephone. Those calling for assistance are connected with the Help Desk and are asked the same questions as individuals appearing in person, and a screening is conducted over the telephone. Individuals who may be eligible for assistance are given an appointment for an intake interview, just as those appearing in person. Similarly, the day of application is considered to be the day of the telephone call, even though the applicant has not yet signed the application cover sheet.

Intake Interview

When applicants return for their intake interview, they check in and wait in the general seating area until their intake worker is available. The agency makes a concerted effort to keep appointments running on time, and tries to keep the maximum wait to less than 20 minutes after the scheduled appointment time. By the time of the intake interview, staff have compiled a file on the applicant containing a copy of the application cover sheet and any other existing records of previous benefit receipt or applications. The intake worker pulls this file for the interview.

For the intake interview, intake workers and applicants sit in semi-private interview booths. These booths are large cubicles with three sides and one opening. There is no door to close. Although this arrangement does grant some privacy, other interview conversations can be heard and the overall level of noise is relatively high. At the time of the site visit, the agency was in the process of renovating this area, in part to enhance the privacy of the interview.

Intake workers typically begin the interview by discussing child support enforcement requirements.⁵ TANF applicants with children of noncustodial parents must sign an agreement to comply with child support enforcement information requirements and procedures. If applicants are not already known to the child support enforcement system but should be, intake workers attempt to collect the necessary information about the identity and location of noncustodial parents. The case will later be transferred to a child support specialist who follows up on needed information and directs appropriate efforts to establish paternity and support orders, and to collect support payments.

The bulk of the intake interview focuses on the specific information and documentation required to establish a case's eligibility. Although they are routinely informed about needed verifications and are given a verification checklist by the Help Desk staff upon their initial visit to the office, applicants are not always fully aware of the information needed. Also, applicants may not always be able to collect all the necessary documents between the time of the initial contact with the Help Desk and the intake interview appointment. It is not unusual for the intake interviewer to ask for additional verifications, which applicants may mail in or bring to the office without needing another appointment.

⁵ Note that workers have considerable discretion in the content and order of the application interview, depending on the unique circumstances of each case.

During the intake interview, workers ask applicants about their previous work history. Applicants who have worked full-time for four or more months over the previous year, and who have no immediate barriers to employment, are referred to the Early Employment Initiative (EEI), which is Mercer County's formal TANF diversion program (see below for more detail). For individuals that are not referred to EEI but instead continue with a TANF application, the intake worker briefly reviews major TANF policies, including the work requirements, sanctions, time limits, and family cap provisions. Workers also conduct a substance abuse screening based on applicants' responses to questions. Applicants recently unemployed are informed that they must register with Unemployment Insurance at some point during the application process prior to eligibility determination. Although intake workers collaborate with applicants to complete certain sections of the Individual Responsibility Plan (IRP), the majority of this information is developed and completed with a different, on-going caseworker once the case has been approved.

Prospective TANF applicants diverted to EEI also complete a TANF application, but it is not processed at that time. EEI participants who do not find work, and whose case transfer is approved by an EEI worker, may have their TANF applications processed immediately. Typically, the Food Stamp and Medicaid portions of the applications of those diverted to EEI are processed when applicants first come into the office, as they are likely to receive FS and MA during their participation in EEI.

Registration with the Department of Employment Services

All employable TANF applicants are required to register with the State Department of Employment Services (DES) as a condition of eligibility. In Mercer County, this requirement is facilitated by the placement of outstationed DES employment specialists at the Mercer County Board of Social Services office. After completing the intake interview, intake workers typically walk applicants directly over to the employment specialist to register for employment services. If the employment specialist is not in at that time, applicants may need to return to the welfare office or to the Employment Services office to complete this part of the application. Based on the information collected during the intake interview (such as work history, education, skills, and access to transportation), employment specialists conduct an employability assessment. They input the information about the individual into a computerized DES job bank, which interested employers may view via the Internet. The employment specialists may also have access to immediate job openings appropriate for applicants. In fact, one employment specialist estimated that as many as 95 percent of the applicants are matched with a job lead through this process. She was unable to estimate how many follow through on these leads or obtain employment through this process.

Although TANF eligibility is conditional upon registering with DES, applicants do not have to conduct any additional job search activities during the application process. They are also not required to return to the employment specialist after their initial visit. According to one employment specialist interviewed, most applicants willingly participate in the process, although a small number of applicants are initially reluctant. Once the case is determined eligible, all employment-related activities are transferred to a TANF case manager who monitors compliance and progress on an on-going basis.

Although staff noted that they brief clients on the general program requirements during the intake interview, they indicated that clients typically do not have all the specific information about the program requirements, including work responsibilities and activities, until after determination occurs and they meet with their on-going case manager. Thus, although they may not drop out of the

application process based on their initial understanding of program basics, some applicants may be later sanctioned for noncompliance or may leave the rolls once they learn the specific program requirements.

Eligibility Determination

After the intake interview, applicants' files are transferred to a "pending eligibility worker" for eligibility determination (even cases for individuals that were referred to EEI are transferred to a pending worker in case they are ultimately referred back to TANF after their participation in EEI). Eligibility workers have 30 days from the date of application to complete the eligibility determination. Although some cases may take longer to process, eligibility determination for TANF typically occurs within a month. Applicants generally do not need to meet again with eligibility workers after their initial intake interview; those that need to submit additional documentation for the application process may do so by mail or by dropping material off at the front desk.

Applicants are informed of the eligibility decision, benefit amount, or reason for denial by mail. Unsuccessful applicants may request a fair hearing at any point after the eligibility determination, but if they do so within 15 days of the decision, they may receive benefits during the appeal process.

Diversions Assistance: The Early Employment Initiative (EEI)

The EEI is a short-term program (25-30 days) for otherwise eligible TANF applicants.⁶ It is a mandatory requirement for "work-ready" applicants (those with a high school degree or equivalent and four months of full-time work experience over the previous year), and accepts volunteers as well. The goal of EEI is to provide employment assistance and incentive payments to help work-ready eligible applicants gain employment and avoid TANF receipt. Although the primary goal of the EEI is employment, the program includes a one-time incentive payment for those who find work in the program.

Individuals who are referred to the program must meet with the EEI social worker. During the first EEI meeting, program expectations are communicated to participants. Specifically, participants are required to look for work each weekday of the program. Participants must verify their job search by the signatures of the potential employers visited. EEI participants must continue to meet with the EEI social worker on a regular basis. The EEI worker conducts a basic employability assessment, provides job development services (like resume writing and interview skills), and offers referrals to a variety of agencies to meet applicants' identified needs.

Participants receive activity payments while they are in the program to cover the costs of looking for work (primarily child care and transportation, but activity fees have been used for items as diverse as an answering machine and an electric breast pump). EEI participants who find work must have the employer send a verification sheet to the EEI office, and the EEI worker will also call the employer to confirm employment. Participants who do find work are eligible to receive a one-time incentive payment. The amount of the payment varies according to family size. For example, a two-person family receives a \$515 incentive payment, and a three-person family receives \$521. In contrast, the

⁶ By "otherwise eligible," is meant that the applicant appears to be eligible on the basis of information provided during the intake interview, but not necessarily that all required verifications and other documentation have been provided.

monthly TANF grant is \$322 for a two-person family and \$424 for a three-person family. The EEI worker monitors job retention for up to four months after participation.

Although the EEI program has certain requirements, such as verifying the employment search on a daily basis, EEI workers have some discretion in enforcing the rules. For example, if a participant is clearly working on employment issues in good faith but does not produce 10 job leads in one week (10 job leads is the standard requirement), the EEI worker can waive the 10-lead regulation. If a TANF applicant referred to EEI is found by the EEI worker to not be work-ready, or does not find employment after a month in the program, the applicant is enrolled directly into TANF if otherwise eligible.

Mandatory EEI participants who do not comply with the program are not eligible at that time to receive TANF payments (although they can receive FS and Medicaid if eligible). They may, however, drop out of EEI and reapply for TANF immediately, with no period of ineligibility following EEI non-compliance. Moreover, individuals may participate in EEI only once in a three-year time period, regardless of the outcome or of their compliance or non-compliance with program requirements. The only potential cost or penalty is that any EEI activity payment counts as income for TANF eligibility purposes.

Exhibit 7.2 below is a representation of the TANF application process in Mercer County, with an emphasis on information exchanged and application decision points.

Historical Perspective

Along with the general provisions for public assistance, the application process for WFNJ also changed in 1997. Specifically, a number of new application requirements were developed to align the application process with overall program goals. For example, in addition to participating in an employability assessment, WFNJ applicants have to register with employment services to fulfill application requirements. Additionally, applicants who have had employment experience in the year preceding their application are required to explore alternative resources, including participation in the Early Employment Initiative, to promote employment and divert assistance until truly needed. Finally, the application requirement to comply with child support enforcement was initiated under WFNJ; previously, there was no explicit application requirement to collect or process information on the non-custodial parents of applicants' children.

In general, interviewed staff felt that clients were less likely to apply, or more likely to drop out of the TANF application process, than they would have been under AFDC. Respondents cited applicant child support enforcement regulations and general knowledge of the work requirements among potential applicants as the two primary deterrents to completing TANF applications. Also, merely having to register with the employment specialist, even though no further activities were required, has reportedly deterred some applicants.

Exhibit 7.2

Application Process: Mercer County, NJ

	Reception and Intake	Application Interview	Complete Information and Verification	Pending Application Requirements Complete Employability Assessment Requirements	Conduct Job Search
Information Provided by Client	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purpose of visit • Summary information about family, resources, needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demographic information • Family and household composition • Income, assets, resources • Prior welfare experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional/remaining information and verifications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Register with EEI 	Names and signatures of 10 employers contacted
Information Provided by Agency:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assistance programs, benefits, and sources available at agency relevant to applicant's situation • General requirements for application process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pending application requirements • Likely eligibility • Likely benefits • Conditions for receiving benefits • Referral to the Early Employment Initiative (EEI), as appropriate 			
Applicant Decisions:	<p>Whether to sign and file application</p>	<p>Whether to proceed with application</p>	<p>Whether to complete pending application requirements within timeframe</p>		
Application Results:	<p>Applicant does not begin process</p> <p>Applicant signs and files application form; receives information on needed documents and verifications; and schedules an application interview</p>	<p>May be referred to other programs or service providers</p> <p>Proceeds with application; given 30 days to complete requirements; application is entered into administrative system</p>	TANF denied due to incomplete application; other benefits denied or granted	TANF benefits denied due to circumstantial ineligibility; other benefits denied or granted	TANF benefits granted

Applicant Decision Points

Both changes in the application process and changes in program policies may influence individuals' decisions to apply for WFNJ or complete the application process. On the initial day of contact with the office, applicants are directed to the Help Desk where they participate in a short screening process before signing the application cover sheet. Although it is possible that some of the information conveyed to potential applicants at this point may deter them from continuing the process, it is unlikely that they would have received enough detailed information to change their original intention to apply for assistance. After completing the Help Desk screening, applicants schedule an intake interview for a later day. During the intake interview, applicants are required to sign an agreement to comply with child support enforcement; those unwilling to complete this step may end the application process at that point. Applicants may also withdraw from the application process after learning briefly about the program requirements during the intake interview. The application requirement to register with Employment Services is an additional employment-related step that pre-WFNJ applicants did not have to fulfill, and workers noted that a few applicants are reluctant to continue the process after this point.

In our case record review of prospective and actual TANF applicants in New Jersey, we measured how many individuals proceeded through each of the following steps in the application process:

- Complete initial screening with Help Desk staff
- Attend intake interview
- Sign affidavit of agreement to cooperate with child support enforcement agency
- Register with the Department of Employment Services
- Provide all necessary verifications

TANF Application Decisions, Experiences, and Outcomes in Mercer County

This section presents findings on the application decisions, experiences, and outcomes of a sample of individuals appearing at the Mercer County welfare office with a potential interest in applying for TANF and other program benefits. The findings are based on the follow-up interviews and case record reviews.

Applicants and Applicant Decisions

The study collected information on individuals with an interest in TANF that appeared at the Mercer County welfare office from 9/24/2001 – 2/15/2002. A random, stratified sample of these individuals was surveyed by telephone from 3 to 9 months after entering the study sample by appearing at the welfare office and signing a contact sheet. Exhibit 7.3 summarizes their TANF application decisions and results. Note that approximately 6 percent (13 individuals) of the research sample received diversionary assistance through the Early Employment Initiative.

Exhibit 7.3**TANF Application Decisions and Results: Mercer County (n = 200)^a**

Certified TANF Applicants (%)	56.2
Uncertified TANF Applicants (%)	34.1
Nonapplicants (%)	3.9
Applicants receiving Diversionary Assistance under the EEI program (%)	5.7

Source: Case Record Reviews.

^a Percentages weighted by stratum size.

Exhibit 7.4 displays selected socio-economic and demographic characteristics of the individuals and families with an interest in TANF at the time they appeared at the Mercer County welfare office. The exhibit presents weighted means and frequencies for the total research sample, as well as statistics for each study stratum.

As Exhibit 7.4 shows, the average family in the study sample has fewer than 2 children, although almost half of the households include other (non-caretaker) adults, bringing the average household size up to about 4 persons. Not surprisingly, about three-quarters of the families are headed by a single parent, and only 14 percent of the households include an employed member. There are few important differences between the certified and the uncertified groups. Although uncertified families have average monthly incomes of \$100 more than certified families, the difference is not statistically significant, due in large part to the wide variance in monthly incomes.

The follow-up survey included questions about the motivation individuals had in coming to the welfare office to ask about, or apply for, cash benefits. Exhibit 7.5 presents the results for Mercer County. The prevalent major reason for seeking assistance reported by individuals at the Mercer County welfare office is a loss of income (51 percent), with job loss being the most common event behind that loss. Another 12 percent reported the major reason as an inability to make ends meet, with some of the underlying cause being an increase in living expenses. Interestingly, among the 14 percent of the study sample reporting “other” reasons for seeking assistance, some came to the welfare office initially interested primarily in non-cash assistance.

Among the research sample in Mercer County, about 4 percent decided not to apply for assistance after appearing at the welfare office for information. When asked the main reason why they decided not to apply, over half of these few individuals responded either that they had too much income or found employment. Exhibit 7.6 presents the results.

Exhibit 7.4**Selected Baseline Characteristics of Prospective TANF Applicants: Mercer County, NJ**

Individual, Family, or Household (HH) Characteristic	Total Research Sample^a (n = 200)	Certified for TANF (n = 100)	Uncertified for TANF (n = 100)
Age of prospective applicant (mean years)	31.5	32.3	30.5
Ethnicity of prospective applicant (%):			
Hispanic	14	11	16
Non-Hispanic:			
White	11	10	12
African-American	68	74	62*
Asian, Pacific Islander, or Native American	1	2	1
Multi-ethnic/Other	5	3	9
Persons in HH (mean)	4.1	4.2	3.9
Children in family (mean)	1.7	1.7	1.7
Families living with other adults in HH (%)	47	49	46
Prospective applicant's marital status (%)			
Married	6	3	9*
Separated	10	11	10
Divorced/Widowed	10	11	10
Never married	73	75	71
Family's living situation (%)			
Own house	6	4	9
Rent	49	47	51
Live with others and do not pay rent	16	17	15
Live with others and pay rent	27	31	23
Other (Includes shelter)	1	1	2
Public housing or Section 8 (%)	28	30	25
Educational attainment of prospective applicant (%)			
Less than HS	30	36	23**
HS or GED only	41	42	43
Trade school or license	7	8	6
Trade school or license and HS or GED	19	15	23
College degree	3	1	5
HH with employed member (%)	14	11	18
Family receives child support income (%)	15	17	11
Monthly income available to family (mean) ^b	\$376	\$331	\$434

Source: Follow-up Survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

^a Percentages weighted by stratum size.^b "Income" includes earned and unearned income available to the family to meet monthly expenses.

Exhibit 7.5**Major Reason for Seeking Assistance: Mercer County, NJ**

Major reason (%)	All (n = 200) ^f	Certified (n = 100)	Uncertified (n = 100)
Prospective applicant or other adult in household lost a job	36	33	38
Household lost income ^a	15	15	15
It became too hard to make ends meet ^b	12	11	13
Household composition changed ^c	7	7	8
Prospective applicant or child became ill or pregnant ^d	11	16	5**
Family moved	5	6	3
Other ^e	14	12	17

Source: Follow-up Survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

^a “Household lost income” includes the following responses: prospective applicant or other adult in household started earning less money from a job; prospective applicant lost some other type of income; financial help from a friend or relative stopped; and, no income/lost income.

^b “It became too hard to make ends meet” includes the following responses: rent, mortgage, or utilities went up; it was getting harder and harder to make ends meet; and, needed to supplement income/needed income to support kids.

^c “Household composition changed” includes the following responses: number of people in household increased; separation from spouse/partner; and, household member died.

^d “Prospective applicant or child became ill or pregnant” includes the following responses: prospective applicant became sick or disabled; child became sick or disabled; and, pregnancy.

^e “Other” includes the following responses: encouraged by office to apply for cash assistance when applying for other benefits; wanted Medicaid or Food Stamp benefits; seeking assistance – related to transportation or unspecified; homeless; in school/student; and, other.

^f Percentages weighted by stratum size.

Exhibit 7.6**Main Reason for Deciding Not to Apply: Mercer County, NJ**

Main Reason	Percentage of Nonapplicants (n = 9)
Too much income	43
Found a job	14
Did not provide verifications	29
Other	14

Source: Follow-up survey.

Application Experiences

In an effort to understand the level of effort required to complete the TANF application in Mercer County, as well to observe how far uncertified applicants progressed through the application process, the study used the case record reviews to measure the specific requirements for each TANF applicant. Exhibit 7.7 presents findings on the proportion of applicants facing specific behavioral and informational requirements described earlier in this chapter, as well as the proportion fulfilling each requirement (Note that the sample for this exhibit only includes applicants.)

As the exhibit shows, the proportion of uncertified individuals failing to complete various requirements increases as they get further into the process. Thus while 83 percent of the uncertified applicants attended the intake interview, only 59 percent registered with DES, and only 39 percent of uncertified applicants submitted all required verifications. This is largely due to uncertified applicants' decisions not to complete the process, either because they were informed that they would not qualify on other grounds (such as income or assets), or because they decided not to complete the process for other reasons.

As described earlier in this chapter, individuals with recent labor market experience who are otherwise eligible for TANF are referred to Mercer County's formal TANF diversion program, the Early Employment Initiative, in the middle of the application process. As indicated in Exhibit 7.7, overall, about 6 percent of the individuals in our sample were referred to EEI. Significantly, about 95 percent of those referred for EEI were not certified for TANF within 30 days of filing an application. In the next section below, we analyze outcomes for those individuals at follow-up (3 to 9 months after appearing at the welfare office).

Exhibit 7.7**TANF Application Requirements—Percentage Required/Percentage Completed: Mercer County, NJ**

Application Requirement (%)	All Applicants (n =191)^a	Certified (n = 100)	Uncertified (n =91)
Complete initial screening with Help Desk staff	99%/98%	99%/100%	100%/98%
Attend intake interview	100/93	100/100	99/83***
Agree to cooperate with child support enforcement agency	96/90	96/99	97/78***
Register with the Department of Employment Services	99/78	99/94	99/59***
Attend EEI program	6/NA	1/1	13/NA
Provide all necessary verifications	100/74	100/100	99/39***

Source: Case record review

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

^a Percentages weighted by stratum size; data include applicants onlyNA = not applicable

Exhibit 7.8 presents the way in which individuals proceed through the TANF application process in a more dynamic way. The exhibit presents the probability that any research sample member appearing at the welfare office will complete a sequenced step in the application process (first line across), as well as the conditional probability that once reaching a given step, an individual will move on to the next steps or outcome in the process.

Reading the table in Exhibit 7.8 from left to right indicates the probability that an individual who has reached the step in the left hand column will complete each of the remaining steps and become certified.⁷ For example, the table shows that those who complete the initial screening with a Help Desk worker and sign an application have a 79 percent chance of registering with DES and a 53 percent chance of becoming certified for TANF. Reading the table down each column indicates the probability the probability that an individual who completes the step in each row will also complete the step in the column. For example, 93 percent of the individuals who sign an application at the Help Desk also complete an intake interview. Similarly, 85 percent of the individuals who complete an intake interview also register with DES. The exhibit shows little drop-off between steps in the process, even though applicants must return to the office at least once, for the intake interview.

⁷ Note that individuals are considered to have completed a step in the process if they fulfilled the specific step's requirements or if they were exempt from those requirements. Note also that individuals with missing data for any of the application steps are not included in the analysis.

Exhibit 7.8**Probability of Advancing Through Steps in the Application Process: Mercer County, NJ (n = 161)**

Step in Process	Step in Process ^a				
	Help Desk	Intake Interview	Child Support Agreement	Register with DES	Certified for TANF
Appear at office	.94	.87	.84	.74	.50
Help desk		.93	.89	.79	.53
Intake interview			.96	.85	.57
Child support				.89	.59
Register with DES					.67

Source: Case record review.

^a Percentages weighted by stratum size.

In the follow-up survey, respondents were asked whether or not they thought they were eligible for TANF at the time they appeared at the Mercer County Board of Social Services office. Results are presented in Exhibit 7.9. Overall, more than half of all respondents reported that they believed themselves to be eligible for TANF when they went to the office. Curiously, a significantly higher proportion of uncertified than certified applicants believed themselves to be eligible for TANF when they appeared at the welfare office.

Exhibit 7.9**Pre-Application Ideas About Eligibility: Mercer County, NJ**

Applicant's Ideas About Likely Eligibility (%)	Total ^a (n = 200)	Certified (n = 100)	Uncertified (n = 100)
Believed to be eligible	61	53	71***
Believed to be ineligible	21	23	18
Was not sure	18	24	11**

Source: Follow-up Survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

^a Percentages weighted by stratum size

The follow-up survey sought to measure applicants' satisfaction with the application process. In particular, two survey questions focused on the adequacy of information and office assistance in negotiating the application process. One question asked respondents how well they understood the application process and its requirements and another asked their opinions about the adequacy of office staff assistance in negotiating the application process. Results are presented in Exhibit 7.10.

As the exhibit shows, although a majority of respondents reported that they "really understood" the process and its requirements (59 percent), an important portion answered they were either unsure or had no idea at all about what was required to complete the TANF application (41 percent). However,

because certified applicants were as likely as uncertified applicants to report some confusion with the process, it did not seem to create an important barrier to completing the application successfully.

When asked about how helpful office staff were in assisting them through the application process, over 60 percent overall answered that office staff provided all or most of the assistance applicants felt they needed. However, as the exhibit shows, the uncertified respondents were far less likely to report that staff provided the needed help. When interpreting this finding, note that uncertified applicants are more likely to be dissatisfied with the process, particularly when so many of them felt that they qualified for TANF when they applied (see Exhibit 7.9 above).

Exhibit 7.10

Applicant Opinions About the Application Process and Staff Assistance: Mercer County, NJ

Opinions About Application Process and Office Staff	Total (n = 200)	Certified (n = 199)	Uncertified (n = 100)
How well did applicant understand application process (%):			
Really understood	59	60	59
Somewhat unsure	22	19	25
No idea at all	19	21	16
How much of the help you needed was provided by office staff (%):			
All	38	52	22***
Most	26	22	31
Only some	27	23	31
None	9	3	16***

Source: Follow-up survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

^a Percentages are weighted by stratum size.

Application Outcomes

Observing TANF application outcomes, both at the time of application and at the time of the follow-up interview several months later, may provide insights into whether the application process may be deterring otherwise eligible individuals from applying for, or completing an application for, TANF benefits. Before investigating this issue, we present findings about the benefit programs and benefits that TANF applicants in our study were able to access. The results regarding benefits are presented in Exhibit 7.11. The exhibit illustrates the important finding that even though they were not certified for TANF, some of the uncertified families were newly approved for food stamps or Medicaid, although in far smaller proportions than for TANF-certified families.

Exhibit 7.12 presents findings about why uncertified cases were denied for TANF cash assistance. These results are based on the case record review and represent the “official” administrative reason for denial. As the exhibit shows, only 19 percent of the uncertified families were denied TANF due to circumstances. The largest proportion (43 percent) were denied for failure to provide all necessary verifications, with another 27 percent either failing to show for a schedule appointment or withdrawing voluntarily.

Exhibit 7.11

Application Outcomes: Benefits, Mercer County, NJ

Benefit Outcome	Total^a (n = 200)	Certified (n = 100)	Uncertified (n = 100)
Mean monthly TANF benefit	N/A	\$311	N/A
Newly certified for food stamps (%)	42	60	19***
Mean monthly food stamp benefit (for newly certified)	\$254	\$268	\$203**
Newly certified for Medicaid (%)	47	80	8***

Source: Case record review

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

^a Percentages weighted by stratum size.

Exhibit 7.12

Reasons for Denial of Uncertified Applicants: Mercer County, NJ

Reason for Denial (%)	Percentage of Uncertified Applicants (n = 91)
Denied for circumstances: too much income	19
Denied for circumstances: too many assets	0
Denied for circumstances: other	0
Failure to keep scheduled appointments	16
Failure to provide verifications or required documentation	43
Voluntary withdrawal	11
Noncompliance with child support enforcement	4
Failure to comply with EEI requirement	3
Other reason	4
Reason not indicated in case record	1

Source: Case record review

When interpreting these results, it is important to note first that caseworkers are not always accurate in selecting a reason for denial; as long as they enter any reason they are able to complete casework on the application. Second, some applicants who failed to complete the application process may have done so because of a belief that they would be found ineligible on other grounds. The follow-up survey included an item designed to measure the extent to which those who failed to complete the application believed that they would be found ineligible for circumstances. Responses from the survey are summarized in Exhibit 7.13 (note that not all of the 74 individuals failing to complete the process responded to this item on the follow-up survey).

Exhibit 7.13

Reported Main Reason for Failure to Complete Application: Mercer County, NJ (n = 60)

Main Reason	Percentage of Uncertified Applicants ^a
Too much income	21
Found a job	9
Too many assets	2
No dependent children	0
Missed interview	2
Did not provide verifications	27
Decided not to complete the process	5
Did not cooperate with child support enforcement	4
Were told to apply for other benefits	2
Other	29

Source: Case record review.

^a Includes answer to survey question about reasons for being denied *only* for applicants were *not* denied assistance due to circumstances.

The findings in Exhibit 7.13 indicate that about 32 percent of the applicants who failed to complete the process did so because they thought they would not be found eligible (“too much income,” “found a job,” “too many assets”). On the other hand, many others listed as their main reason for failing to complete the process the particular behavioral or informational requirement with which they did not comply, with the largest proportion responding that they did not provide all necessary verifications.

In assessing the degree to which otherwise needy families may have been informally diverted from filing or completing the application, the follow-up survey asked respondents about their current situations and how things have changed since appearing at the Mercer County Board of Social Services office (approximately 3 to 9 months later, depending on the time of appearance at the office and the date of the telephone interview). Results are presented in Exhibit 7.14.

Overall, compared to certified families, uncertified families are better off financially, more likely to be employed, and less likely to be receiving TANF or other assistance at follow-up. For example, certified families were receiving TANF, food stamps, Medicaid insurance, and subsidized school meals at a significantly higher rate than uncertified families in our research sample. Notably, some

uncertified families had reapplied and been approved for TANF over the follow-up period (16 percent). Also, 28 percent of uncertified families were receiving food stamps at follow-up, and more than 70 percent of the uncertified families were receiving Medicaid.

Exhibit 7.14

Family Status at Follow-up and Changes Since Applying for TANF: Mercer County, NJ

Current Status or Change at Follow-up	All (n = 200)^a	Certified (n = 100)	Uncertified (n = 100)
Participation in assistance programs (%)			
Currently receives TANF benefits	42	64	16***
Currently receives food stamps	45	60	28***
Currently receives Medicaid	84	95	71***
Currently receives WIC	34	35	34
Child currently receives subsidized school meals (Among households with school-age children)	76 (n = 117)	86 (n = 59)	64*** (n=58)
Employment status and changes			
Currently employed (%)	36	30	42*
Mean hours worked (employed only)	34	32	36**
Left employment since applying (%)	5	5	6
Found employment since applying (%)	27	24	30
Employed at both time points (%)	9	6	12
Employed at neither time point (%)	59	65	52*
Change reported in (%):			
Household size	23	21	26
Marital status	2	2	3
Housing situation	23	25	22
Current income and changes in income^b			
Current mean monthly income available to family	\$756	\$649	\$874**
Change in monthly income since applying	\$388	\$316	\$464
Change in overall financial situation since applying (%)			
Better now	51	54	47
Worse now	11	8	15
Same	38	38	38

Source: Follow-up survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

^a Percentages weighted by stratum size.

^b "Income" includes all earned and unearned income available to the family to meet monthly expenses.

While uncertified families were less likely than certified families to be receiving TANF or other benefits at follow-up, they were also 40 percent more likely to be employed (42 percent as opposed to 30 percent for certified families), and were receiving 35 percent more in total monthly income. By the time of the follow-up interview, both groups of respondents had experienced improvements in average income since appearing at the welfare office. This is not surprising, given that more than half of all respondents had reported some loss of income as the major reason for appearing at the welfare office in the first place. Curiously, uncertified families were no more likely than certified families to report that their situation had improved. When family incomes reported at follow-up are compared to incomes reported at the time families first appeared at the welfare office (as opposed to asking respondents directly whether or not they are better off now), roughly the same proportion of each group had experienced the same change in circumstances, as indicated in Exhibit 7.15.

Exhibit 7.15

Changes in Family Financial Status Based on Reported Income at Application and at Follow-up

Change in Financial Status (%)	Certified (n = 85)	Uncertified (n = 91)
Better off: reported monthly income increased by more than \$100	71	64
Worse off: reported monthly income decreased by more than \$100	9	10
The same: no change of more than \$100 in monthly income	20	26

Source: Follow-up survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

As discussed above, most of the TANF applicants diverted to the EEI Program were not certified for TANF in the short term (within 30 days of applying). Because these individuals and their families were otherwise eligible for TANF on the basis of their reported income and assets, it is important to ask about their status at follow-up. Exhibit 7.16 presents data on the benefit and income status of uncertified EEI participants compared to other uncertified families. Although there are no statistically significant differences between the two groups on these outcomes (note that sample sizes are very small, with only 13 uncertified individuals in the EEI referral group), none of the uncertified EEI referrals were receiving TANF at the time of follow-up, a relatively high two-thirds of them were employed, and they reported an average increase of \$658 in monthly income since applying for TANF.

In a final analysis designed to indicate the potential for otherwise needy families to be diverted from applying for, or completing the application for TANF, we compare the follow-up monthly incomes and employment statuses of certified clients, non-applicants, uncertified EEI referrals, and applicants who did not complete the process. Because some of the groups are so small and may vary greatly by family size, we present per capita monthly incomes. Results for individuals who responded to these questions in the follow-up survey are shown in Exhibit 7.17.

Exhibit 7.16**Family Status at Follow-up and Changes Since Applying for TANF: EEI Clients Compared to Non-EEI Clients**

Current Status or Change	Uncertified and Not Referred to EEI (n = 87)	Uncertified and Referred to EEI (n = 13)
Participation in assistance programs (%)		
Currently receives TANF benefits	18	0
Currently receives food stamps	26	38
Currently receives Medicaid	72	62
Currently receives WIC	36	23
Child currently receives subsidized school meals (Among households with school-age children)	63 (n = 48)	67 (n = 10)
Employment status and changes		
Currently employed (%)	39	62
Mean hours worked (employed only)	37	33
Left employment since applying (%)	7	0
Found employment since applying (%)	28	46
Employed at both time points (%)	11	15
Employed at neither time point (%)	54	38
Income status and change		
Current mean monthly income available to family	\$862	\$989
Change in monthly income since applying	\$433	\$646
Change in overall financial situation since applying (%)		
Better now	51	54
Worse now	11	8
Same	38	38

Source: Follow-up survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

Exhibit 7.17**Reported Family Per Capita Monthly Income at Follow-Up: Mercer County, NJ**

	Certified Applicants (n = 100)	Uncertified EEI Referrals (n = 13)	Applicant Non-Completers (n = 60)	Non-Applicants (n = 9)
Per capita monthly income	\$258	\$328	\$294	\$392
Percent employed at follow-up	30%	62%**	43%*	56*

Source: Follow-up survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

As the exhibit shows, in Mercer County, non-applicants, applicant non-completers, and uncertified EEI referrals at follow-up have incomes statistically equivalent to those of certified applicants. If, on average, the appropriate families are deciding not to apply, or deciding not to complete the TANF application, one would expect their incomes to be the same as, or higher than, the incomes of certified applicants. This is in fact the case in Mercer County. Moreover, both EEI referrals and applicant non-completers are more likely to be employed than certified applicants at follow up. These results are not conclusive proof that inappropriate informal diversion does not happen in Mercer County. However, the fact that nonapplicants, applicant non-completers, and those referred to EEI are not worse off than certified applicants is strong evidence that, on average, otherwise needy families are not diverted from TANF benefits.

Concluding Observations

This concluding section addresses the three major research questions for the case studies in the context of the TANF application process in Mercer County, New Jersey. As discussed in Chapter One, those questions include:

How does the TANF intake and application process operate in selected local TANF Program offices and how has it changed since the end of the AFDC Program?

Although New Jersey had experimented with employment-oriented welfare reform prior to TANF, the State's cash assistance program and its application process changed with the introduction of Work First New Jersey in 1997. The changes were designed to introduce elements of the Work First philosophy into the application process. Most significant were the requirement for applicants to register with the Department of Employment Services (DES) and the requirement for otherwise eligible applicants with recent labor force attachment to explore alternative resources, including participation in the Early Employment Initiative. The application requirement to agree to cooperate with efforts to collect child support enforcement was also initiated under WFNJ.

In Mercer County, the new requirements have been well integrated into the overall TANF application process. In practice, the requirements to register with DES and to agree to cooperate with child support enforcement efforts are minimal burdens for applicants. Although a mandatory referral to the

EEI may potentially interrupt the TANF application process, in essence participation in the program is voluntary -- mandatory EEI participants who do not comply with the program may reapply for TANF immediately, with no period of ineligibility following EEI non-compliance. Moreover, individuals may participate in EEI only once in a three-year time period, regardless of the outcome or of their compliance or non-compliance with program requirements. In our sample of applicants, only 6 percent were referred to the EEI Program, and most were not approved for TANF benefits.

What is the potential for individuals to be formally or informally diverted from filing or completing TANF applications in selected TANF offices?

In Mercer County, any formal or informal diversion is most likely to occur *after* an individual files an application. This is largely due to the fact that individuals may file a formal application within minutes of appearing at the office by signing the one-page application form. Because the application serves many assistance programs, therefore, TANF eligibility is automatically tested for all applicants. It is thus far more likely that applicants will be diverted from completing the TANF application, rather than diverted from applying for TANF.

The formal way in which applicants may be diverted from TANF benefits in Mercer County is through the Early Employment Initiative (EEI) Program. Otherwise eligible applicants with a recent attachment to labor market must participate in EEI for up to a month before receiving TANF benefits. Individuals who successfully find adequate employment during that period may become ineligible for TANF due to increased income. Individuals who do not find a job may be enrolled directly into TANF. Finally, individuals who do not cooperate with EEI may reapply for TANF benefits with no restrictions.

Among the application requirements implemented since the end of the AFDC Program that may lead to informal diversion, the most important potential hurdles are registration with DES and the requirement to agree to cooperate with child support enforcement efforts. Usually a representative from the DES is present at the Mercer County Board of Social Services offices, making the requirement to register a relatively easy one to fulfill. Similarly, the child support enforcement requirement is simple to fulfill. Relevant applicants must sign a form agreeing to cooperate with efforts to collect child support payments from non-custodial parents. In fact, relatively few applicants in our research sample failed to register with the DES or sign the agreement to cooperate with child support enforcement.

What is the evidence concerning the possible contribution of changes in the application process to changes in individuals' decisions to apply and to complete the application process?

Among individuals with children appearing at the Mercer County Board of Social Services, 96 percent filed applications for TANF and 4 percent did not; 56 percent of the research sample families were certified for TANF, 34 percent applied but were not certified, and 6 percent applied and were diverted to the Early Employment Initiative Program. Of the uncertified applicants, a relatively large 81 percent did not complete the application process. Information about the contribution of changes in the application process to changes in decisions to file and complete an application come from three main sources: the informed opinion of caseworkers; applicant reports about their motivation and expectations in the application decision and process; and applicant behavior as reflected in the case record. We consider the evidence from each source below.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, staff interviewed for the study felt that individuals were less likely to apply, or more likely to drop out of the TANF application process, than they would have been under AFDC. However, informants felt that overall changes in TANF policy—in particular, strengthened child support enforcement regulations and work requirements—are more of a deterrent to potential and actual applicants than are specific application requirements.

Combining results from the follow-up survey with results from the case record reviews provides some statistical evidence about the potential for formal and informal diversion. Most notably, only about 6 percent of the individuals in our research sample were formally diverted from completing the application process. The per capita incomes of diverted families are statistically equivalent to the per capita incomes of certified families at follow-up, although the EEI families are far more likely to be employed. This finding indicates that formally diverted families fare at least as well as those certified for TANF. Moreover, the fact that EEI families derive more of their income from employment indicates that the diversionary program in Mercer County is generally well-targeted.

Evidence concerning informal diversion is more difficult to pinpoint. For example, about 4 percent of the sample of individuals with children appearing at the Mercer County welfare office decided not to apply for TANF. Over half of them felt that their incomes were too high to qualify. In fact, nonapplicants' per capita monthly income at follow-up is statistically the same as the per capita monthly income of certified applicants. Given their equivalent financial situation at follow-up, therefore, there is no prima facie evidence that, on average, otherwise eligible or needy families are being diverted from filing applications for TANF in Mercer County.

When focusing on uncertified applicants for signs of diversion, a relatively high 81 percent did not complete enough of the application process to be denied for circumstances. Of those who did not complete the application, about one-third felt that they would not qualify on the basis of income or assets. The remainder offered a variety of main reasons why they did not complete the application. Families who did not complete the TANF application have monthly per capita incomes at follow-up that are statistically equivalent to the incomes of certified applicants. The fact that applicant non-completers are on average no worse off than families who were found eligible for TANF again suggests that in Mercer County, otherwise needy or TANF-eligible families are not failing to complete the application process.

Chapter Eight: The TANF Application Process and Results in Ramsey County, Minnesota

Overview and Context

The Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) replaced AFDC as the State’s primary cash assistance program in January 1998, and is based on an experimental program that was first implemented in select counties in 1994. The Ramsey County Community Human Services Department (RCCHSD) administers MFIP in St. Paul and surrounding communities.

MFIP is a State-supervised, county-administered program. Within the policy framework established at the State level, county offices have considerable latitude in developing administrative practices, including those that pertain to the application process and to diversionary assistance.

Exhibit 8.1 presents some key MFIP policies.

Exhibit 8.1: Overview of MFIP Policy^a

<i>Time Limit</i>	Lifetime limit of 60 months
<i>Time Limit Exemptions or Extensions</i>	Exemptions for victims of domestic violence, minor parents, and 18- and 19-year-old care givers who comply with employment and educational plans No provision to “earn back” months for the lifetime limit Possible extensions: single-parent families participating in work-related activities 30 hr. per week, of which 25 hr. must be employment, and two-parent families participating a total of 55 hr. per week, with 45 hr. of employment; victims of family violence who are complying with a safety plan or alternative employment plan; those not able to work for more than 30 days because of illness or injury; those who must care for an ill or disabled family member; those unable to get or keep a job because of mental illness, a learning disability, or an IQ below 80; those in compliance with MFIP policies for at least 10 of the last 12 months; those not on sanction during the 60th month or the last 30 days of MFIP eligibility. (Extension policy effective 10/01/2001)
<i>Work Requirements</i>	Nonexempt adults are required to work within six months of certification, or sooner at county discretion. Adults in single-parent families are required to engage in work or work-related activities (1) for a minimum of 20 hours if there is a child under 6 years old, or (2) for a minimum of 30-35 hours if no child is younger than 6. The minimum total requirement for two-parent families is 55 hours.
<i>Work Activities</i>	Work, subsidized employment, work-related training
<i>Work Activity Exemptions and Deferrals</i>	Exempt if child is less than 12 months old, with a lifetime maximum of 12 months exemption per family. Exempt if recipient has a physical or mental disability, is caring for disabled family member, or is victim of domestic violence in compliance with an approved alternative employment plan.
<i>Earned Income Disregard</i>	18 percent of earnings when determining initial eligibility; 38 percent of earnings for ongoing cases.
<i>Diversions Assistance</i>	Lump sum payment made to enable the applicant to maintain existing income and avoid ongoing participation in MFIP. Repayment is not required.

^a Policies prevailing at the time a sample was drawn for the study (10/01–2/02).

The Ramsey County Community Human Services Department office in St. Paul administers MFIP and other Federal and State cash, medical, food, and emergency programs. Intake for the agency's financial and medical programs also takes place in nine neighborhood sites. Application forms for programs administered by RCCHSD are widely available throughout the county, at hospitals and other institutions and at agencies that serve low- and moderate-income individuals and families. The agency accepts applications by mail and fax, in addition to those submitted in person.

The RCCHSD downtown office (the study site) serves an ethnically diverse population that includes many non-native speakers. Staff report that the largest ethnic minority groups served are Hmong and Hispanic. The office also serves increasing numbers of refugees and immigrants from Somalia, Russia, Ethiopia, Cambodia, and Thailand. The area has been a refugee resettlement site for many years. The large number of non-English speaking applicants has led the agency to hire bilingual staff and contract with several agencies for interpreter services. Staff also report that most of these potential applicants are accompanied by an English-speaking relative or friend when they first come to the office. The initial screening process enables the office to arrange an interpreter for the eligibility interview, if necessary.

At the time of our research visit to the Ramsey County downtown office in October 2001, the office was screening approximately 500 clients weekly, for all programs, and conducting about 250 intake interviews for family programs. Thirty percent of new applications are for Medical Assistance (MA) only; applications for cash assistance, food stamps, and emergency programs comprise the balance. The office receives 200 to 300 MFIP applications each month.

Staff noted a gradual decline in the number of cases over the past four years, as jobs became more plentiful. Recently, however, the office had seen a recent upswing in the number of applications as a result of a less favorable economic climate. Increased rental costs in the area also have contributed to economic problems for low-income families.

Subsequent sections of this report describe the MFIP application process and identify key decision points and factors related to individuals' decisions to proceed.

TANF Application Process

The following description of the application process in this case study is based on a visit to the Ramsey County Community Human Services Department (RCCHSD) in St. Paul in October 2001.

Overview of the Process

The application process for MFIP is clearly designed, and clients are guided through the well-organized intake and application process by staff.

Intake for MFIP and other programs is a two-stage process, during which prospective applicants interact with two separate staff members who gather information and conduct preliminary screenings to determine appropriate next steps. The first point of contact at the office is the receptionist, whose primary function is client registration. Subsequently, prospective applicants speak with a client access worker, who gathers additional information and schedules an eligibility interview with a financial worker. Two to three receptionists, and the same number of client access workers, are on duty at any given time. Staff members currently use two automated systems to process applications.

MFIP applicants must meet program eligibility guidelines for cash assistance, as well as the State’s 30-day residency requirement. Minnesota does not impose any behavioral requirements before an application may be filed. All program participation requirements—including job search, employment, and cooperation with child support enforcement—go into effect after the case is certified. A diversionary assistance program, available as a lump sum payment, is an alternative to MFIP for applicants who do not need ongoing cash assistance.

The goal of self-sufficiency through employment is a fundamental tenet of MFIP. Prospective applicants are matched with an employment provider during the eligibility interview; providers assign job counselors to work with recipients on work-related activities.

Reception and Intake

The staff at the Ramsey County office create a welcoming environment for prospective applicants. Areas through which clients move in this renovated building are bright, clean, and spacious. The large lobby contains a work resource corner, telephones for the use of clients who wish to contact their workers, and an ATM machine. Wall racks hold pamphlets and information sheets on employment resources and community-based programs and services.

Individuals who enter the lobby in search of service first encounter a “greeter,” who is seated at a desk at the entrance to the intake reception room. Individuals who indicate an interest in applying for assistance programs are instructed to take a number from a dispenser inside the reception room and told that they will be called to speak with a staff member.

On one side of the reception room is a long counter with six numbered windows, behind which are stationed receptionists and client access workers. Opposite the counter is ample seating for clients. Ramsey County deputies are stationed at the far end of the room.

Individuals are called in numerical order to speak with a receptionist. The receptionist first asks about the purpose of the visit. Most individuals indicate that they are there to apply for assistance. Those who come to the office for other purposes—to speak with their workers, to drop off documentation—are directed, as appropriate. For example, if a case was closed within the previous 30 days, and the individual is reapplying for the same benefits, the case is referred to the previously assigned financial worker.

In registering new applicants, receptionists use the PRIME, the county’s interactive registration and tracking system, to record family information and to confirm that a case is not currently open in this office. Applicants are asked to provide the name, date of birth, and Social Security number for each member of the assistance unit, as well as the family’s address. Further inquiry is designed to flag cases potentially in need of expedited service.

Applicants receive the State of Minnesota Combined Application for Cash Assistance, Food Stamps, and Health Care (CAF). The receptionist instructs them to complete and sign the first page of the CAF, detach it from the body of the application form, and return it to a basket at an adjacent station. The process is identical for all assistance programs, and the signed first page of the CAF is considered a formal application.

Staff report that most new clients proceed to the next stage; only infrequently do individuals leave the office with the application form intact after speaking with the receptionist. These individuals are not applicants until they submit the signed first page of the CAF.

Before calling applicants to the window for the second phase of intake, client access workers retrieve the first page of the CAF from the basket, review it, and enter family and household data in MAXIS, the State's automated system. Access workers conduct a search for program participation history by entering each applicant's Social Security number. If necessary, the applicant is asked to provide information missing from the first page of the CAF. Using the one-page "Schedule Information Form," access workers pose a short series of questions, in which the applicant indicates programs of interest, amount of income and value of assets, health insurance coverage, rent/ownership status, the need for an interpreter, and a few other items. Workers also confirm the presence of children in the family residence, in order to determine whether the case is potentially eligible for a family- or adult-focused program, and to schedule an appointment with a financial worker in a family or adult unit, as appropriate.

Access workers use the automated scheduling function in the PRIME system to identify available appointment times for the eligibility interview. After conferring with the applicant, the interview is scheduled and the applicant receives an appointment card.

Cases in need of expedited service meet with a financial worker on the same day. The office also reserves some appointments each day for other people facing difficult circumstances, such as a utility shutoff. Staff report that they prefer to schedule nonemergency cases three to five days after receipt of the application, and they sometimes are able to meet this goal. This interval gives most clients time to prepare for the interview—to complete the application form, gather documentation, and arrange transportation and work schedules. During a visit to the office in October 2001, cases were typically being scheduled for the eligibility interview within nine working days. Staff explained that the longer time frame was the result of a recent upsurge in the number of requests for benefits.

At the end of the interview, workers date-stamp the first page of the CAF and assign a case number. Applicants are instructed to complete the remainder of the CAF and to bring it to the eligibility interview, along with other documentation detailed on the "Verification Requirement List." This list is found in a large packet of materials given to applicants at this point. The packet also contains brochures on the agency's numerous assistance programs, a community resource booklet, examples of reporting forms needed by recipients before and after certification, and information on child support enforcement. Client access workers emphasize the importance of bringing verifications and, for employed applicants, pay stubs from the last two months, to the interview. Some staff suggest that many applicants find the amount of information conveyed in the packet overwhelming; however, staff do not think that this discourages anyone from continuing the application process. Applicants simply may not take the time to read the contents of the packet.

At no time during these brief, initial contacts with applicants do staff make definitive statements about potential eligibility and benefits. Client access workers may briefly describe individual programs if the applicant asks. Only to applicants whose estimates of income and assets appear to exceed program guidelines substantially would an access worker suggest that they may not qualify for benefits. Nonetheless, these individuals also are told that they have the right to proceed with the application and that final determinations are not made until after the eligibility interview.

Eligibility Interview

The office maintains a relatively timely schedule for eligibility interviews. Applicants who are not present at the appointed time receive a 20-minute grace period, after which they are paged. Applicants may reschedule their interviews as needed. The application for cash assistance and food stamps is denied when a rescheduled appointment is not kept and the application was filed more than 30 days before the last scheduled appointment. Medical Assistance is pended for 45 days.

Applicants returning to the office for the eligibility interview proceed directly to the first window in the reception room to register. Beforehand, a clerk compiles all documentation needed for the interview, including the first page of the CAF and previous records of program participation. Applicants are advised at screening to check in with the receptionist when they arrive for the appointment. The receptionist enters the applicant's name on the PRIME check-in log. The financial worker checks the applicant's arrival on the PRIME. Once applicants have checked in, financial workers retrieve the case paper record and page applicants in the lobby. If an applicant does not show up for the appointment, the scheduled worker is assigned another application for that time slot.

Eligibility interviews take place in financial workers' cubicles. Observations of interviews in one intake unit revealed cubicles that are spacious and uncramped, with ample space for seating and three high walls that create a sense of privacy. The environment in this recently renovated part of the building is comfortable and pleasant. Voices from other interviews could be heard but were not loud enough to be distracting.

Most of the interview is devoted to the exchange of information and documentation needed to determine eligibility and to a review of program roles and expectations. The content and information requirements of each interview are clearly prescribed, although staff report that financial workers have a lot of discretion in their approach to obtaining information and determining the order in which various segments of the interview are conducted.

Interviews often begin with a brief discussion of the circumstances that led the applicant to apply for assistance, followed by a page-by-page review of the application form. Financial workers probe for information missing on the CAF and make a list of items to be retrieved later. The eligibility interview has several other important components.

Verifications. The financial worker reviews documents provided by the applicant and, if necessary, makes a list of outstanding information needed to determine eligibility. Applicants must provide proof of residency in Ramsey County, two forms of identification for each member of the TANF assistance unit, and other documents related to family membership, as appropriate (birth certificates, marriage certificates, and divorce decrees). Other key items include earned and unearned income, assets (checking and savings accounts, automobile), monthly housing and utility costs, child care expenses, employment status, medical and other insurances, absent parent information, immigrant status, disability, and third party payments.

Prior to the eligibility interview, RCCHSD staff have not provided assistance to applicants in gathering verifications; however, the financial worker may offer to do so during the eligibility interview. For example, the worker might complete a form to get a birth certificate if the applicant does not have this document. Additionally, if the client is known to the RCCHSD system, some

verification items (photo IDs, birth and other certificates) are on record at the office. In this way, the worker can tailor the gathering of verifications to the individual's circumstances.

Program orientation. State statute outlines the content of the MFIP orientation.¹ Major topics include the time limit, expectations regarding employment, cooperation with Child Support Enforcement, and sanctions for noncompliance with program rules. Financial workers also review recipient requirements for reporting changes in income and assets, family composition, and other circumstances that affect eligibility, as well as potential services (transitional child care, extended Medical Assistance, child care for those who are employed) available through RCCHSD and community providers. Applicants receive a special folder organized by Ramsey County to complement discussion points; relevant forms, brochures, and a list of "job hotlines" are organized by topic within the folder. At the end of the orientation, applicants sign a form acknowledging that key points were covered.

Employment. During the eligibility interview, applicants choose an employment provider. Applicants are given a document entitled "Guidelines for Selecting an Employment Service Provider," which contains a list of agencies that offer employment services for MFIP participants. RCCHSD staff believe that this activity is important in supporting the concept of welfare reform. Applicants who previously received MFIP are reassigned to the same employment provider. The financial worker sends a referral form to the provider, who later sends status updates to the ongoing worker assigned to the case.

The employment provider conducts an orientation, and a job counselor works with each MFIP recipient to develop an employment plan and guide the individual in job search for as many as eight weeks. In certain cases, the job counselor may approve an education or training plan.

Some employment providers are located in Work Resource Hubs (WRH). The collaboration between, and collocation of, RCCHSD and employment providers in these sites is designed to foster a productive partnership between employment and financial services. The WRH is a one-stop location that provides assistance in employment, public health, child care, and social services. Some centers specialize in working with specific ethnic/racial populations.

Child support enforcement. RCCHSD assists the county attorney's office, which is responsible for child support enforcement (CSE), by gathering information and by encouraging applicants to cooperate in efforts to obtain support from noncustodial parents. During the interview, applicants are required to sign a form that allows the financial worker to make an electronic referral to CSE. The county attorney's office may impose a 25 percent sanction on the MFIP grant for noncompliance with CSE.

Financial workers try to create an incentive for applicants to pursue child support orders by emphasizing child support as a potentially more stable, longer-term source of income than time-limited MFIP benefits. Workers remind applicants that child support is available until a child is 18 years old and that a court order may also stipulate payment of medical insurance and child care. Staff also tell applicants that they will keep all of the child support grant. (Before January 2001, the State

¹ The office held group orientations during the conversion of ongoing cases from AFDC to MFIP (about 8,000 active cases). Since that time, orientation has been presented to the individual during the eligibility interview. Staff believe that this is a more effective forum for handling clients' individual concerns.

kept most of the grant as a “recovery,” with a \$50 pass-through to the custodial parent. The child support payment is now deducted from the MFIP grant amount.)

Diversionsary Assistance

One option available to applicants who face an immediate challenge to continued employment is Diversionsary Assistance (DA). Eligibility for DA is determined during the interview. The major purpose of the diversionsary program is to maintain existing employment and earnings, or to provide temporary assistance for a family that is likely soon to increase its income. Financial workers may issue a diversionsary grant when a family would otherwise become eligible for MFIP and when no other emergency program is appropriate. The most common situations in which this option is considered involve car repairs that an applicant cannot afford or an acute child care problem that would cause an applicant to stop working. Moreover, to be eligible for DA, families may not have current incomes that exceed 200 percent of the Federal poverty standard. (Those with incomes below 120 percent are likely to be eligible for MFIP.) The amount of the DA grant is not to exceed four months of MFIP payments for an equivalent size family.

Staff note that each county in Minnesota has developed its own policies and procedures for Diversionsary Assistance. In Ramsey County, for example, a diversionsary payment may be approved for car repair when the car is in the name of the applicant, the applicant has a valid driver’s license and insurance, and the cost of repairs does not exceed the value of the car. Other circumstances are also taken into account: an individual who can use public transportation to get to work and to deliver children to child care may be expected to do so in lieu of having the car repaired.

Diversionsary Assistance is not considered an MFIP (TANF) benefit (and does not appear as such in administrative data reported to the federal government). To issue a diversionsary grant, the financial worker denies cash assistance. The client is not required to repay the lump sum grant; however, the worker calculates the equivalent number of months in MFIP benefits and the client is not eligible for MFIP, Emergency Assistance (EA), or Emergency General Assistance (EGA) until that number of months has passed. Diversionsary Assistance does not count toward the 60-month lifetime time limit. For example, a DA payment of \$1000 to a family with two members is equivalent to approximately two months of MFIP benefits. A family may not receive another DA grant for 12 months following the initial issuance.

Eligibility Determination

RCCHSD has 30 days from the date of application to determine eligibility for MFIP and food stamp benefits, although there is no specific policy that limits the period for which an application may remain pending, if staff determine that the applicant is cooperating with the agency by attempting to secure required verifications. Processing guidelines for Medical Assistance are 15 days for pregnant women, 60 days for persons whose MA eligibility is based on a disability, and 45 days for all other applicants.

Exhibit 8.2 below is a representation of the TANF application process in Ramsey County, with an emphasis on information exchanged and applicant decision points.

Exhibit 8.2

Application Process: Ramsey County, MN

	Reception	Screening/Scheduling	Eligibility Interview	Pending Application Requirements									
Information Provided by Client:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purpose of visit • Address (to confirm residency in Ramsey County) • Receipt of assistance in another county, if applicable • Name, date of birth, SSN for each member of assistance unit • Emergent situation, if applicable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reason for seeking assistance • Specific program(s) of interest • Additional family and household information, if missing from p. 1 of the CAF • Confirm presence of children in household residence • Income, assets • Own/rent status • Program history (open/closed case) • Need for interpreter 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family and household composition • Income, assets • Employment status • Documentation (client ID, child(ren)'s birth certificate(s), bank statements, pay stubs, etc.) • Current employment • Housing and utility costs • Medical expenses; access to insurance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outstanding verifications and other documentation 									
Information Provided by Agency:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Receptionist registers client by entering information in automated county system (PRIME). • New applicants receive the <i>State of Minnesota Combined Application for Cash Assistance, Food Stamps, and Health Care</i> (CAF) • Receptionist directs client to complete first page of the CAF and return it to the adjacent client access worker. 	<p>Access worker checks case history on automated state system (MAXIS). Distributes information packet containing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brochures describing individual assistance programs and emergency services administered by the agency • Verification checklist • Community resource booklet • Monthly household reporting form • Landlord report on rent and housing features • Voter registration card • Information and forms related to Child Support Enforcement • Access worker schedules eligibility interview and provides appointment card. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MFIP requirements and expectations • Client rights and responsibilities • Information leading to selection of employment provider • Referral to Child Support Enforcement • Additional documentation needed to determine eligibility/certify client for benefits • Sample grant calculation • Child care resources • Likely eligibility • Estimated benefit amount • Diversionary assistance option, if appropriate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determination for MFIP benefits within 30 days 									
Applicant Decisions:	<p>Whether to sign and submit p. 1 of the CAF</p>	<p>Whether to schedule eligibility interview</p>	<p>Whether to proceed with application</p>	<p>Whether to provide outstanding verifications and other documentation</p>									
Application Results:	<table border="0"> <tr> <td>Applicant does not begin process</td> <td>Applicant will speak with access worker for next stage of intake</td> </tr> </table>	Applicant does not begin process	Applicant will speak with access worker for next stage of intake	<table border="0"> <tr> <td>Application process ends</td> <td>Proceeds with application; schedules eligibility interview</td> </tr> </table>	Application process ends	Proceeds with application; schedules eligibility interview	<table border="0"> <tr> <td>Applicants does not continue process</td> <td>Applicants proceed with application process; have 30 days to provide office with complete information</td> </tr> </table>	Applicants does not continue process	Applicants proceed with application process; have 30 days to provide office with complete information	<table border="0"> <tr> <td>MFIP benefits denied</td> <td>MFIP benefits denied due to circumstantial ineligibility; other benefits denied or granted</td> <td>MFIP benefits granted</td> </tr> </table>	MFIP benefits denied	MFIP benefits denied due to circumstantial ineligibility; other benefits denied or granted	MFIP benefits granted
Applicant does not begin process	Applicant will speak with access worker for next stage of intake												
Application process ends	Proceeds with application; schedules eligibility interview												
Applicants does not continue process	Applicants proceed with application process; have 30 days to provide office with complete information												
MFIP benefits denied	MFIP benefits denied due to circumstantial ineligibility; other benefits denied or granted	MFIP benefits granted											

Historical Perspective

MFIP demonstration projects conducted in eight counties between 1994 and 1998 established the basis for the current program. These pilot projects introduced financial incentives, mandated employment and training activities, and simplified rules and procedures, and explored their effects on economic outcomes and measures of well-being for long-term recipients of cash assistance.

The major policy changes instituted under TANF transformed program rules and requirements; however, staff note that the County responded to welfare reform not by changing application procedures but by adding elements to support the employment focus of TANF. The essential structure and sequence of application activities that existed under AFDC—reception, preliminary screening, the eligibility interview—remained in place. The current focus on employment has greatly modified the content of the eligibility interview and, therefore, the role of the financial worker, who focused on eligibility determination under AFDC. Application workers now discuss job search, work requirements, and sanctions as part of the eligibility interview; as described earlier in this report, the applicant selects an employment provider during this meeting.

Other changes have occurred on or around the time that MFIP was instituted statewide, although staff believe that none of these have affected the decisions of individuals who seek program benefits. In July 1997, Minnesota introduced a 30-day residency requirement as part of program redesign. With the transition to MFIP, the State revised the application form, to make it less specific to AFDC. In January 2001, the method by which program recipients receive child support payments changed, and financial workers now more strongly emphasize cooperation with child support enforcement during the eligibility interview. These actions, however, are not linked specifically to the introduction of TANF. County offices have not required a personal responsibility agreement under AFDC or MFIP, although applicants do sign a statement that acknowledges their understanding of basic rights and responsibilities.

Applicant Decision Points

Potential MFIP applicants may decide to continue with or disengage from the application process at several points. For example, on the day that individuals visit the office, they may or may not decide to provide basic family and household information to the receptionist, to sign and submit the first page of the CAF, and to speak briefly with the client access worker and schedule an interview with a financial worker. Most individuals who appear at the office, however, do so and become applicants. A more likely point of disengagement from the process occurs when applicants do not appear for their eligibility interviews, which are typically scheduled within nine days of application. Applicants may be denied benefits if they do not appear and do not attempt to reschedule. Applicants who attend the eligibility interview may not meet program guidelines for benefits or, if they appear eligible, may decide not to complete the process by failing to provide required verifications.

Supervisors and managers interviewed for the study described the range of reasons for which prospective applicants decide not to apply or not to complete the application process. Workers report that changed circumstances often lead applicants to cancel appointments or simply fail to appear for eligibility interviews. For example, applicants may find a job between the date of application and date of interview; others may be awaiting employment and may schedule the appointment in case the job does not materialize. The “hassle factor” may affect the decisions of applicants who perceive that

finding a job on their own is easier than dealing with the welfare department, or those who find that the benefit amount is too small to justify their compliance with behavioral requirements.

Informants mentioned other reasons that applicants decide not to complete the process. For example, many are dissuaded from applying from the beginning because they consider the grant standards, which have not increased since 1996, to be too low. Some applicants may feel that the information they must provide is too personal, and some may not wish to reveal all information on income sources or living arrangements. Others are reluctant to comply with child support enforcement or to jeopardize an informal child support arrangement with a noncustodial parent. Staff note that some applicants are simply incapable of meeting program requirements because they face significant barriers, such as substance abuse that prevents them from working. In general, individuals who have other options—help from relatives or friends, unemployment compensation—may not complete the process.

In our case record review of prospective and actual TANF applicants in Ramsey County , we measured how many individuals proceeded through each of the following steps in the application process:

- Sign and submit page 1 of the CAF
- Complete screening interview with access worker
- Attend eligibility interview
- Select employment provider
- Sign referral form for child support enforcement
- Provide all required verifications

TANF Application Decisions, Experiences, and Outcomes in Ramsey County

This section presents findings on the application decisions, experiences, and outcomes of a sample of individuals appearing at the Ramsey County Community Human Services Department downtown office with a potential interest in applying for TANF and other program benefits. The findings are based on the follow-up interviews and case record reviews.

Applicants and Applicant Decisions

The study collected information on 365 individuals with an interest in TANF that appeared at the RCCHSD from 10/10/01 – 2/19/02. A random, stratified sample of these individuals was surveyed by telephone from 3 to 9 months after entering the study sample by appearing at the welfare office and signing a contact sheet. Exhibit 8.3 summarizes their TANF application decisions and results.

Exhibit 8.3**TANF Application Decisions and Results: Ramsey County, MN^a**

Certified TANF Applicants (%)	56.8
Uncertified TANF Applicants (%)	38.3
Nonapplicants (%)	4.4
Applicants receiving Diversionary Assistance (%)	0.4

Source: Case Record Reviews

^a Percentages weighted by stratum size

Exhibit 8.4 displays selected socio-economic and demographic characteristics of the individuals and families with an interest in TANF that appeared at the RCCHSD County welfare office. The exhibit presents weighted means and frequencies for the total research sample, as well as statistics for each study stratum.

As Exhibit 8.4 shows, the average family in the study sample has less than 2 children, although about half of the households include other (non-caretaker) adults, bringing the average household size up to about 4 persons. About four-fifths of the families are headed by a single parent, and only a small percentage own their own home.

There are some notable differences between the certified and the uncertified groups. For example, uncertified family heads are less likely never to have been married, indicating a potentially shorter path to establishing and collecting child support. In fact, however, uncertified families were no more likely than certified families to be receiving child support at the time they appeared at the welfare office. Perhaps more important are the differences in employment and monthly incomes. Uncertified families are almost twice as likely as certified families to have had an employed household member when they appeared at the welfare office. Moreover, uncertified families had more than twice the monthly income of certified families, indicating a higher level of overall financial well-being.

Exhibit 8.4**Selected Characteristics of Prospective TANF Applicants: Ramsey County, MN**

Individual, Family, or Household (HH) Characteristic	Total Research Sample^a (n = 200)	Certified for TANF (n = 102)	Uncertified for TANF (n = 98)
Age of prospective applicant (mean years)	29.5	28.4	31.1**
Ethnicity of prospective applicant (%):			
Hispanic	13	14	12
Non-Hispanic:			
White	38	36	41
African-American	29	33	24
Asian, Pacific Islander, or Native American	11	10	12
Multi-ethnic/Other	9	8	10
Persons in HH (mean)	4.0	4.0	4.0
Children in family (mean)	1.9	1.8	1.9
Families living with other adults in HH (%)	52	55	48
Prospective applicant's marital status (%)			
Married	20	17	24
Separated	11	6	17**
Divorced/Widowed	15	11	19*
Never married	55	67	39**
Family's living situation (%)			
Own house	11	4	19***
Rent	51	53	49
Live with others and do not pay rent	14	14	13
Live with others and pay rent	23	27	16*
Other (Includes shelter)	2	2	2
Public housing or Section 8 (%)	17	21	11
Educational attainment of prospective applicant (%)			
Less than HS	23	22	23
HS or GED only	50	50	50
Trade school or license	4	4	3
Trade school or license and HS or GED	19	19	18
College degree	6	6	5
HH with employed member (%)	27	20	37***
Family receives child support income (%)	14	12	16
Monthly income available to family (mean) ^b	\$511	\$312	\$787***

Source: Follow-up Survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

^a Percentages weighted by stratum size.^b "Income" includes earned and unearned income available to the family to meet monthly expenses.

The follow-up survey included questions about the motivation individuals had in coming to the welfare office to ask about, or apply for, cash benefits. The results for Ramsey County are presented in Exhibit 8.5, below. The prevalent major reason for seeking assistance reported by individuals at the RCCHSD office is a loss of income (47 percent), with unemployment being the most common event behind that loss. Interestingly, uncertified families were almost half as likely as certified families to have experienced a recent job loss.

Exhibit 8.5

Major Reason for Seeking Assistance: Ramsey County, MN

Major reason (%)	All ^f (n = 200)	Certified (n = 102)	Uncertified (n = 98)
Prospective applicant or other adult in household lost a job	36	44	26**
Household lost income ^a	11	9	14
It became too hard to make ends meet ^b	14	14	14
Household composition changed ^c	9	8	11
Prospective applicant or child became ill or pregnant ^d	12	7	18**
Family moved	11	12	9
Other ^e	7	7	7

Source: Follow-up Survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

^a “Household lost income” includes the following responses: prospective applicant or other adult in household started earning less money from a job; prospective applicant lost some other type of income; financial help from a friend or relative stopped; and, no income/lost income.

^b “It became too hard to make ends meet” includes the following responses: rent, mortgage, or utilities went up; it was getting harder and harder to make ends meet; and, needed to supplement income/needed income to support kids.

^c “Household composition changed” includes the following responses: number of people in household increased; separation from spouse/partner; and, household member died.

^d “Prospective applicant or child became ill or pregnant” includes the following responses: prospective applicant became sick or disabled; child became sick or disabled; and, pregnancy.

^e “Other” includes the following responses: encouraged by office to apply for cash assistance when applying for other benefits; wanted Medicaid or Food Stamp benefits; seeking assistance – related to transportation or unspecified; homeless; in school/student; and, other.

^f Percentages weighted by stratum size

Among the research sample in Ramsey County, about 4 percent decided not to apply for assistance after appearing at the welfare office for information. When asked the main reason why they decided not to apply, a majority of these few individuals answered either that they had too much income or found a job.

Exhibit 8.6**Main Reason for Deciding Not to Apply: Ramsey County, MN**

Main Reason	Percentage of Nonapplicants (n = 10)
Too much income	50
Found a job	10
Decided not to complete the application process	20
Other	20

Source: Follow-up survey

As described earlier in this chapter, Minnesota has a formal TANF diversionary assistance program, targeted on families needing immediate assistance to continue employment or to begin employment. As indicated above in Exhibit 8.3, only 0.4 percent of our research sample received diversionary assistance in place of ongoing MFIP cash assistance.

Application Experiences

In an effort to understand the level of effort required to complete the TANF application in Ramsey County, as well to observe how far uncertified applicants progressed through the application process, the study used the case record reviews to measure the number of specific requirements for each TANF applicant. Exhibit 8.7 presents findings on the proportion of applicants facing specific behavioral and informational requirements described earlier in this chapter, as well as the proportion fulfilling each requirement. The number before the backslash (/) indicates the percentage of applicants required to complete a specific application requirement. The number after the backslash indicates the percentage of those required who completed the specific requirement. For example, 88 percent of the certified group was required to select an employment service provider, and 100 percent did so. Similarly, although 68 percent of the uncertified group was required to select an employment provider, only 61 percent of those required actually selected a provider.²

As the exhibit shows, the proportion of uncertified individuals failing to complete various requirements increases as they get further into the process. Thus while 81 percent of the uncertified applicants attended the eligibility interview, only 61 percent chose an employment provider, and only 48 percent of uncertified applicants submitted all required verifications.

Exhibit 8.8 presents the way in which individuals proceed through the TANF application process in a more dynamic way. The exhibit presents the probability that any research sample member appearing at the welfare office will complete a sequenced step in the application process (first line across), as well as the conditional probability that once reaching a given step, an individual will move on to the next steps or outcome in the process.

² Note that some of the uncertified group would have dropped out of the process by the time they would have to select a provider, but all members of the uncertified group are included when estimating the proportion required.

Exhibit 8.7**TANF Application Requirements—Percentage Required/Percentage Completed: Ramsey County, MN**

Application Requirement (%)	All Applicants ^a (n = 190)	Certified (n = 102)	Uncertified Applicants (n = 88)
Sign and submit page 1 of the CAF	100%/100%	100%/100%	100%/100%
Complete screening interview with access worker	100/100	100/100	100/100
Attend eligibility interview	99/93	100/100	98/81***
Select employment provider	80/87	88/100	68***/61***
Sign referral form for child support enforcement	80/89	87/100	70***/69***
Provide all required verifications	100/79	100/100	100/48***

Source: Case record review

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

^a Percentages weighted by stratum size; only includes applicants

Exhibit 8.8**Probability of Advancing Through Steps in the Application Process: Ramsey County, MN^a**

Step in Process	Step in Process (n = 188)				
	Sign CAF	Screening	Eligibility Interview	Employment Provider	Certified for TANF
Appear at office	.96	.96	.89	.85	.57
Sign CAF		1.00	.93	.89	.60
Screening			.93	.89	.60
Eligibility interview				.97	.65
Employment provider					.67

Source: Case record review

^a Percentages weighted by stratum size.

Reading the table in Exhibit 8.8 from left to right indicates the probability that an individual who has reached the step in the left hand column will complete each of the remaining steps and become certified.³ For example, the table shows that those that complete the initial screening with an access

³ Note that individuals are considered to have completed a step in the process if they fulfilled the specific step's requirements or if they were exempt from those requirements. Note also that individuals with missing data for any of the application steps are not included in the analysis.

worker have a 93 percent chance of completing an eligibility interview, an 89 percent chance of selecting an employment provider, and a 60 percent chance of becoming certified for TANF. Reading the table down each column indicates the probability that an individual who completes the step in each row will also complete the step in the column. For example, 89 percent of the individuals who complete the screening with an access worker also either choose an employment provider or are exempt. Similarly, 65 percent of the individuals who complete the eligibility interview become certified for TANF. The exhibit indicates that most people appearing at the Ramsey County office are able to complete most of the steps required to determine eligibility.

In the follow-up survey, respondents were asked whether or not they thought they were eligible for TANF at the time they appeared at the RCCHSD downtown office. Results are presented in Exhibit 8.9. Overall, about two-thirds of the applicants reported that they believed themselves to be eligible for TANF when they went to the office, with no differences between the groups.

Exhibit 8.9

Pre-Application Ideas About Eligibility: Ramsey County, MN

Applicant's Ideas About Likely Eligibility (%)	Total^a (n = 200)	Certified (n = 102)	Uncertified (n = 98)
Believed to be eligible	66	63	69
Believed to be ineligible	15	17	13
Was not sure	19	20	18

Source: Follow-up Survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

^a Percentages weighted by stratum size.

The follow-up survey sought to measure applicants' satisfaction with the application process. In particular, two survey questions focused on applicant opinions about the adequacy of information and office assistance in negotiating the application process. One question asked respondents how well they understood the application process and its requirements, and another asked their opinions about the adequacy of office staff assistance in negotiating the application process. Results are presented in Exhibit 8.10.

As the exhibit shows, a majority of respondents reported that they "really understood" the process. Interestingly, although 75 percent of the uncertified group answered that they understood the process, only one-third of them thought that they received all of the information needed to negotiate the application process and its requirements (34 percent). An important portion answered they were either unsure or had no idea at all about what was required to complete the TANF application. However, because certified applicants were as likely as uncertified applicants to report some confusion with the process, it did not seem to create an important barrier to completing the application successfully.

When asked about how helpful office staff were in assisting them through the application process, over 60 percent overall answered that office staff provided all or most of the assistance applicants felt

they needed. However, as the exhibit shows, the uncertified respondents were far less likely to report that staff provided the needed help. As in the case of Mercer County, New Jersey, when interpreting this finding for Ramsey County, note that uncertified applicants are more likely to be dissatisfied with the process, particularly when so many of them felt that they qualified for TANF when they applied (see Exhibit 8.9 above).

Exhibit 8.10

Applicant Opinions About the Application Process and Staff Assistance: Ramsey County, MN

Opinions About Application Process and Office Staff	Total^a (n = 200)	Certified (n = 102)	Uncertified (n = 98)
How well did applicant understand application process (%):			
Really understood	64	57	75***
Somewhat unsure	22	28	13***
No idea at all	14	15	13
How much of the help you needed was provided by office staff (%):			
All	49	61	34***
Most	22	23	22
Only some	22	16	30***
None	7	1	14***

Source: Follow-up survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

^a Percentages are weighted by stratum size.

Application Outcomes

Observing TANF application outcomes, both at the time of application and at the time of the follow-up interview several months later, may provide insights into whether the application process may be deterring otherwise eligible individuals from applying or completing an application for TANF benefits. Before investigating this issue, we present findings about the benefit programs and benefits that TANF applicants in our study were able to access. The results regarding benefits are presented in Exhibit 8.11. The exhibit illustrates the important finding that even though none of the uncertified sample was eligible for TANF benefits, some were newly certified for food stamps and Medicaid. On the other hand, the Exhibit shows that the uncertified group were far less likely than the certified group to gain access to non-TANF benefits.

Exhibit 8.12 presents findings about why uncertified cases were denied for TANF cash assistance. These results are based on the case record review and represent the “official” administrative reason for denial. As the exhibit shows, almost half of the uncertified applicants were denied for

circumstances, and the other half withdrew from the process or failed to keep an appointment or provide all required documentation.

Exhibit 8.11

Application Outcomes: Benefits, Ramsey County, MN

Benefit Outcome	Total^a (n = 200)	Certified (n = 102)	Uncertified (n = 98)
Mean monthly TANF benefit	N/A	\$419	N/A
Newly certified for food stamps (%)	57	84	19***
Mean monthly food stamp benefit (for newly certified)	\$258	\$271	\$170***
Newly certified for Medicaid (%)	48	63	29***

Source: Case record review

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

^a Percentages weighted by stratum size

Exhibit 8.12

Reasons for Denial of Uncertified Cases: Ramsey County, MN

Reason for Denial (%)	Percentage of Uncertified Applicants (n = 88)
Denied for circumstances: too much income	44
Denied for circumstances: too many assets	2
No eligible child	1
Failure to keep scheduled appointments	18
Failure to provide verifications or required documentation	22
Voluntary withdrawal	10
Other reason	1
Reason not indicated in case record	1

Source: Case record review

When interpreting these results, it is important to note first that caseworkers are not always accurate in selecting a reason for denial, but only that some reason must be selected in order to complete casework on the application. Second, some applicants who failed to complete the application process may have done so because of a belief that they would be found ineligible on other grounds. The follow-up survey included an item designed to measure the extent to which those who failed to

complete the application believed that they would be found ineligible for circumstances. Responses from the survey are summarized in Exhibit 8.13

Exhibit 8.13

Reported Main Reason for Failure to Complete Application: Ramsey County, MN

Main Reason (%)	Percentage of Uncertified Applicants Who Failed to Complete Application ^a (n = 45)
Too much income	29
Found a job	11
Too many assets	3
No dependent children	0
Missed interview	13
Did not provide verifications	18
Did not cooperate with child support enforcement	0
Decided not to complete the application	13
Other	13

Source: Follow-up survey

^a Includes answer to survey question about reasons for being denied *only* for applicants who were *not* denied assistance due to circumstances.

When combined with the results from the case record review presented in Exhibit 8.12, the findings in Exhibit 8.13 indicate that some of the applicants who failed to complete the process did so because they thought they would not be found eligible (“too much income,” “too many assets”). On the other hand, others simply listed as their main reason for failing to complete the process the particular behavioral or informational requirement with which they did not comply.

In assessing the degree to which otherwise needy families may have been deterred from filing or completing the application, the follow-up survey asked respondents about their current situations and how things have changed since appearing at the Ramsey County Community Human Services Department office (approximately 3 to 9 months later, depending on the time of appearance at the office and the date of the telephone interview). Results are presented in Exhibit 8.14.

Overall, compared to certified families, uncertified families are better off financially and more likely to be employed. These same differences were observed at the time of appearance at the RCCHSD office, indicating that, on average, the application process seems to have distinguished between better-off and worse-off low-income families. In keeping with this general pattern, uncertified families were far less likely than certified families to be receiving TANF, food stamp, or Medicaid insurance benefits at follow-up.

Exhibit 8.14**Family Status at Follow-up and Changes Since Applying for TANF: Ramsey County, MN**

Current Status or Change	All (n = 200)^a	Certified (n = 100)	Uncertified (n = 100)
Participation in assistance programs (%)			
Currently receives TANF benefits	41	66	9***
Currently receives food stamps	58	82	27***
Currently receives Medicaid	60	77	38***
Currently receives WIC	42	43	40
Child currently receives subsidized school meals (Among families with school-age children)	81 (n = 115)	87 (n = 55)	75* (n=60)
Employment status and changes			
Currently employed (%)	43	32	56***
Mean hours worked (employed only)	35	34	35
Left employment since applying (%)	8	9	6
Found employment since applying (%)	24	22	26
Employed at both time points (%)	19	11	31***
Employed at neither time point (%)	49	65	37***
Change reported in (%):			
Household size	26	19	37***
Marital status	6	3	10*
Housing situation	26	31	19*
Current income and changes in income ^b			
Current mean monthly income available to family	\$983	\$791	\$1,246***
Change in monthly income since applying	474	487	454
Change in overall financial situation since applying (%)			
Better now	51	57	42**
Worse now	9	6	14*
Same	40	37	44

Source: Follow-up survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

^a Percentages weighted by stratum size.^b "Income" includes all earned and unearned income available to the family to meet monthly expenses.

As in the case of the Mercer County applicants, by the time of the follow-up interview, both groups of respondents in Ramsey County had experienced improvements in average income since appearing at the welfare office. This is not surprising, given that more than half of all respondents had reported

some loss of income as the major reason for appearing at the welfare office in the first place. Although the reported increases in average monthly incomes are the same for both groups, uncertified families were less likely than certified families to report that their situation had improved. When family incomes reported at follow-up are compared to incomes reported at the time families first appeared at the welfare office (as opposed to asking respondents directly whether or not they are better off now), certified families were actually far more likely than uncertified families to have experienced an increase in monthly income of more than \$100.

Exhibit 8.15

Changes in Family Financial Status Based on Reported Income at Application and at Follow-up: Ramsey County, MN

Change in Financial Status (%)	Certified (n = 93)	Uncertified (n = 87)
Better off: reported monthly income increased by more than \$100	82	56***
Worse off: reported monthly income decreased by more than \$100	6	13
The same: no change of more than \$100 in monthly income	12	31***

Source: Follow-up survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

In a final analysis designed to indicate the potential for otherwise needy families to be deterred from applying for, or completing the application for TANF, we compare the follow-up monthly incomes of certified clients, non-applicants, and applicants who did not complete the process. Because some of the groups are so small and may vary greatly by family size, we present per capita monthly incomes. We also compare the proportion of families in each group with an employed member. Results for individuals who responded to these questions in the follow-up survey are shown in Exhibit 8.16.

As the exhibit shows, in Ramsey County, both non-applicants and applicant non-completers at follow-up have statistically significantly higher incomes than certified applicants. If, on average, the appropriate families are deciding not to apply, or deciding not to complete the TANF application, one would expect their incomes to be the same as, or higher than, the incomes of certified applicants. This is in fact the case in Ramsey County. Moreover, both applicant non-completers and non-applicants are more likely to be employed at follow-up than certified applicants. This result is not conclusive proof that inappropriate informal diversion does not happen in Ramsey County. However, the fact that families that decide not to apply for TANF, or decide not to complete the application process, are not worse off than certified applicants is strong evidence that otherwise needy families are not being diverted from TANF benefits.

Exhibit 8.16**Reported Family Per Capita Monthly Income at Follow-Up: Ramsey County, MN**

	Certified Applicants (n = 102)	Applicant Non-Completers (n = 45)	Non-Applicants (n = 10)
Per capita monthly income	\$294	\$521***	\$450**
Percent employed at follow-up	32%	49%**	90%***

Source: Follow-up survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

Concluding Observations

This concluding section addresses the three major research questions for the case studies in the context of the TANF application process in Ramsey County, Minnesota. Those questions include:

How does the TANF intake and application process operate in selected local TANF Program offices and how has it changed since the end of the AFDC Program?

In Ramsey County, the implementation of TANF brought about few changes in the application process as it had operated under AFDC. No new behavioral requirements were imposed on applicants, even as major policy changes instituted under MFIP altered the conditions of continuing eligibility for MFIP clients. In keeping with MFIP overall emphasis on transitional cash assistance leading to stable employment, however, two important aspects of the eligibility process did change. First, formal Diversionary Assistance was introduced into the process to help prevent otherwise eligible families with strong labor market attachment from becoming TANF recipients by providing a one-time payment or other assistance to remove barriers to immediate employment. Second, the program's focus on employment was supported by changes in the substance and emphasis of the eligibility interview. For example, eligibility workers now discuss job search, work requirements, and sanctions as part of the eligibility interview. Moreover, applicants select their employment provider during this meeting.

What is the potential for individuals to be formally or informally diverted from filing or completing TANF applications in selected TANF offices?

As in Mercer County, any formal or informal diversion is most likely to occur *after* an individual files an application for TANF in Ramsey County. The formal way in which applicants may be diverted from TANF benefits is with a Diversionary Assistance grant. The grant may be awarded to individuals who need a one-time payment or service to maintain or secure employment. In fact, however, although a small number of individuals in our research sample decided not to apply for assistance, none were granted Diversionary Assistance. Informally, there is no new application requirement introduced after TANF that is likely to deter individuals from applying or applicants from completing the application process. However, learning about the employment-related requirements for MFIP recipients may dissuade some applicants from completing the process.

What is the evidence concerning the possible contribution of changes in the application process to changes in individuals' decisions to apply and to complete the application process?

Among individuals with children appearing at the Ramsey County Community Human Services Department, almost 96 percent filed applications for TANF, and 4 percent did not; 57 percent of the research sample families were certified for TANF, and 38 percent applied but were not certified; less than 1 percent of the sample accepted diversionary assistance in place of ongoing TANF cash assistance. Of the uncertified applicants, about 45 percent did not complete the application process. Information about the contribution of changes in the application process to changes in decisions to file and complete an application come from three main sources: the informed opinion of caseworkers; applicant reports about their motivation and expectations in the application decision and process; and applicant behavior as reflected in the case record. We consider the evidence from each source below.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, staff interviewed for the study felt that the reasons individuals may have for deciding not to apply, or not to complete the application, are not directly related to either application or overall policy changes under TANF. Many of the reasons mentioned by staff not to apply or to complete the application are reasons that would have been relevant under AFDC, as well.

Combining results from the follow-up survey with results from the case record reviews provides some statistical evidence about the potential for formal and informal diversion. Most notably, less than one percent of the individuals in our research sample received a diversionary cash payment during the more than four months observed by the study. Evidence concerning informal diversion is more difficult to pinpoint. For example, about 4 percent of the sample of individuals with children appearing at the RCCHSD office decided not to apply for TANF. Over half of them felt that their incomes were too high to qualify. In fact, nonapplicants' per capita monthly income at follow-up is \$450, statistically higher than the per capita monthly income of certified applicants. Given their better financial situation at follow-up, therefore, there is no *prima facie* evidence that, on average, otherwise eligible or needy families are being deterred from filing applications for TANF in Ramsey County.

When focusing on uncertified applicants for signs of diversion, about 45 percent did not complete enough of the application process to be denied for circumstances. Of those who did not complete the application, about 43 percent felt that they would not qualify on the basis of income or assets. The remainder offered a variety of main reasons why they did not complete the application. Families who did not complete the TANF application have monthly per capita incomes at follow-up of \$521, or over 75 percent more than the average monthly per capita income of certified applicants. The fact that applicant non-completers are on average much better off than families who were found eligible for TANF again suggests that in Ramsey County, on average, otherwise needy or TANF-eligible families are not failing to complete the application process.

Chapter Nine: The TANF Application Process and Results in San Diego County, California

Overview and Context

California’s TANF Program is known as CalWORKS. In San Diego County it is administered by the San Diego Department of Health and Human Services. Under AFDC, California operated a State-supervised, county-administered program. Wide county discretion in administrative arrangements, such as those used for the application process, has continued under TANF, although major policy decisions are made at the State level. The following table includes some of the key TANF policies in California.

Exhibit 9.1

Overview of California’s Major TANF Policies^a

<i>Time Limit</i>	Lifetime limit of 60 months
<i>Time Limit Exemptions or Extensions</i>	Time limit applies to adults only Months exempted—months in which adult is unable to work due to disability or care of disabled person; months in which adult is sanctioned for noncompliance with work requirement; months of eligibility may be “bought back” with child support payments that have been collected by TANF agency No extensions
<i>Family Cap Provision</i>	No additional benefits for any children born after parents have received assistance for at least 10 months
<i>Work Requirements</i>	Adult participants are required to engage in work or work preparation activities for at least 32 hours/week when certified for CalWORKS.
<i>Work Activities</i>	Work; work-related training; unpaid work experience
<i>Work Activity Exemptions and Deferrals</i>	Exempt if older than 60 years or age of youngest child is less than 3 months; exempt for temporary disability or if caring for disabled person
<i>Earned Income Disregard</i>	First \$225/month and half of remaining gross earnings are disregarded
<i>Diversions Assistance</i>	May be used to make one-time payment for costs related to obtaining or maintaining employment; applicant must be otherwise eligible for TANF

^a Policies prevailing at the time a sample was drawn for the study (10/01–2/02).

California’s TANF Program has adopted the federal 60-month time limit on eligibility, but only for adults; dependents may continue to receive cash assistance if the family’s income would otherwise qualify for TANF. Moreover, months of receipt are not counted under some conditions. For example,

months in which an adult is unable to work, or months during which an adult is sanctioned for not complying with work requirements, are not counted toward the 60-month lifetime eligibility limit.

California has implemented a broad work requirement under CalWORKS. Working-age, able-bodied adults with no children younger than 3 months are required to spend at least 32 hours a week working or in work-related activities. The work obligation may be met through unpaid work experience placements. Nonexempt adults who do not comply with the work requirement may be sanctioned with the loss of their portion of the TANF grant; there are no “full family” sanctions.

A further measure to encourage work and to ease the transition to financial independence is California’s relatively generous earnings disregard. In California, the first \$225/month of gross earnings, and half of all remaining earnings, are disregarded when calculating the CalWORKS grant.

TANF Application Process

The Southeast Office was visited for the San Diego Case Study of the TANF application process. The following section provides an overview of the TANF application process and is followed by a more comprehensive and detailed description.

Summary of Process

San Diego County’s TANF application process is characterized by the early identification of applicant needs and the early communication of program requirements and responsibilities. Applicants have no formal work-related requirements, although most are told to look for work during the application process. Most of the application requirements are informational and documentary: applicants are required to provide complete information about, and proof of, their family income, assets, living situation, and other relevant circumstances. Applicants must cooperate with efforts to establish child support from noncustodial parents, and must provide proof of up-to-date immunizations for young children and satisfactory school attendance. If these latter requirements are not met within the 30 days allowed to determine eligibility, however, an otherwise eligible applicant will not be denied assistance. One special feature of the TANF application process in San Diego is the requirement that all applicants receive an unannounced home visit from a fraud investigator.

The TANF application process can be conveniently thought of in three steps: reception, informational interview, and program orientation; intake interview; and completing informational, documentary, and other requirements.

At *reception*, prospective applicants are handed a pre-application packet with a variety of forms. Some forms are designed to collect information about applicants’ needs and circumstances, other forms convey information about client rights and responsibilities, as well as information about the finger-imaging requirement. After completing the informational forms, prospective applicants hand them back to a receptionist, who reviews the forms for completeness. Completed forms are placed in a folder, which is picked up by a clerk for an automated “case clearing,” or a check for each member of the assistance unit against a State data system for current or former participation in benefit programs. The clerk also conducts a “marshall’s clearance” to check for outstanding arrest warrants. When finished clearing the prospective case, the clerk places the folder at the bottom of a stack of folders awaiting the next available worker for an Information, Assessment, and Referral (IAR) interview.

The ***IAR interview*** includes a review of applicants' needs as they appear on the completed pre-application forms, including the benefit programs for which applicants are likely to be eligible. Applicants are screened for immediate need and the possibility of expedited food stamps and expedited cash assistance. Applicants are also informed about the availability of diversion payments in lieu of ongoing cash assistance. Employable applicants are informed about work-related program requirements and are given a brochure about the county's Welfare-to-Work (WTW) Program. At the end of the IAR interview, applicants are given an appointment on a later day for an intake interview and are given relevant packets of forms for the intake interview.

All applicants must attend a ***program orientation session***. Most do so on the same day as the IAR interview, which is also usually the day they have first appeared at the office to apply. The program orientation includes a videotape presentation about CalWORKS policies and reporting and behavioral requirements, as well as information about what is needed for the application.

Applicants normally return to the office for the ***intake interview*** with all or part of their application packets completed. The intake eligibility worker proceeds through the various items in the application package in the order they appear. Applicants who do not bring a required document or verification are given a list of everything they need to provide. They are given 20 days to complete their paperwork.

After the intake interview, all application cases are referred to a fraud investigator. All applicants require a home visit, with the sole exception of a non-needy caretaker caring for a court-dependent child or children; applicants are informed at intake about the home visit. The fraud investigator's home visit is unannounced. Applicants who are not at home at the time of the visit may call to make an appointment for the visit. If after a second visit the applicant does not respond to a second request to make an appointment, the case is denied.

Once applications have been completed, an intake supervisor reviews them. Approved cases go back to their intake workers until they are opened on the administrative system. At that time, cases are transferred to ongoing workers for case maintenance and redeterminations. Denied cases go from the supervisory review to a Medi-Cal worker to determine eligibility for Medi-Cal. Denied applicants have 90 days to file an appeal and review of the decision.

Reception

The Southeast office of the San Diego Department of Health and Human Services is located on a major street several miles east of downtown San Diego; it is in a low-income neighborhood of small, neat single-family homes. The office is open for business from 7 AM until 5 PM weekdays; new applications may be taken until 3 PM. The office is a one-story, largely open structure, with some private offices and interview rooms ringing the main working area. Most workers have booths; interviews and meetings are held in the private rooms that ring the main working area. Spanish-speaking workers are available when needed.

The reception counter faces the building entrance across a small entry hall; there is space behind the counter for three receptionists. Directly after entering the building, visitors may approach the reception counter and state their business. The receptionists ask those requesting assistance a few

questions (such as current circumstances and whether there are children in the family, for example) to try to determine what type of aid is needed and which program may be relevant.¹

Office visitors who are interested in applying for assistance (food stamps, Medi-Cal or CalWORKS) are given a pre-application packet (“Packet A”) and are told to fill out the forms and return them to the receptionist. There is a small waiting area with chairs with tablet arms off to the side of the entry hall. Although they are encouraged to fill out the pre-application forms at the time they talk to the receptionist, individuals may bring the forms home and return with them another day. Applications may be handed in between 7 A.M. and 3 P.M.

The preapplication packet includes:

- The Application for Cash Aid, Food Stamps, and Medi-Cal/State CMSP (known as the “SAWS1”) is a one-page summary of the case that is the official application. The form asks for identification, address, ethnicity, emergency status, and immediate cash or food need status. For those applicants indicating immediate needs, the form asks about current resources, expected income for the month, and expenses. The application is officially filed when the SAWS1 is signed and handed back to the receptionist.²
- A screening form that asks for identification info for all members of the household, as well as the identity of any non-custodial parents.
- An information, assessment, and referral (IAR) form that includes a checklist of family and household needs and available services for those needs.
- A confidentiality notice and records disclosure consent form, which allows the agency to collect any relevant applicant information from other agencies or databases.
- A special office-designed screening form which asks applicants about SSI status, recent assistance, address, friends or relatives that work for Social Services, and whether any of the children in the family attend a specific school.
- A language needs determination form;
- A medical services screening form;
- A two-page coversheet that summarizes rights and responsibilities; and
- A notice about the finger-imaging requirement finger imaging for each adult member of the assistance unit.

¹ Note that all nonrecipients must go through the same intake process, even if the case has closed within 30 days. Moreover, current Medi-Cal or Food Stamp clients must also go through the same process if they want to apply for CalWORKS.

² Individuals who sign the SAWS1 application form, but who leave the office with the rest of the pre-application form, may have their applications held for 3 working days. If those applicants do not appear at the office within that time, the case is denied.

After completing the pre-application forms, individuals hand the forms back to a receptionist. The receptionist reviews the forms for completeness and checks to see that applicants are applying for the benefits they want. Very little substantive program or policy information is exchanged at this point. The receptionist places the forms from Packet A in a folder for the Information, Assessment, and Referral (IAR) clerk.

While applicants wait in the lobby to be called for the IAR interview, the IAR clerk conducts a “case clearing,” checking the individuals in the assistance unit against the county’s administrative system and the State MEDS system for current or prior benefit receipt locally and anywhere in California. The clerk also conducts a “marshall’s clearance” to check for outstanding arrest warrants. When finished clearing the case, the clerk places the forms in a box for the next available IAR worker.

During the time that applicants wait to meet with an IAR worker, they are given an employment history questionnaire to complete. The form is typically given to applicants as they hand in the pre-application package to a receptionist.

Information, Assessment, and Referral (IAR) Interview

Applicants usually do not have to wait more than 15-20 minutes to be called in for the IAR interview. The interview is relatively brief (usually less than 30 minutes) and attempts to establish areas of need and an overview of the circumstances of the case. A usual first step for IAR workers is to review the summary information on the SAWS1 and ask some questions about income and resources to see if clients are likely to qualify for CalWORKS. If an applicant is obviously ineligible for CalWORKS, the worker will move on to the Food Stamp and Medi-Cal application requirements. The CalWORKS portion of the application may be officially denied for circumstances at this point, even though an applicant’s circumstances have not been verified.

The IAR interview includes a review of applicants’ needs as disclosed on the IAR checklist. IAR workers may refer applicants to an in-office social service coordinator for immediate social needs, such as housing or domestic abuse, for example. IAR workers also inform applicants about expedited food stamps, and expedited cash assistance for those in immediate need. Applicants are also told about the opportunity for diversion payments in lieu of ongoing assistance. According to interviewed workers, as well as agency records, applicants rarely request diversion payments in lieu of cash assistance.

The IAR interview is the usual point at which diversionary assistance payments are introduced and explained. Because diversionary payments are restricted to job-related needs, not all IAR workers routinely explain the policy to applicants. Also, because applicants must be presumptively eligible for CalWORKS to qualify for diversionary payments, most applicants opt for ongoing CalWORKS benefits, rather than a one-time diversionary payment.

All applicants must sign a Personal Responsibility Agreement (PRA), which outlines client responsibilities concerning work and other program requirements and rules, such as child

immunizations, school attendance, and time limits, for example. The PRA is typically the same for all CalWORKS applicants, as most of the responsibilities apply to all recipients.³

CalWORKS applicants are given Application Packet C, which includes the full application (known as the “SAWS2”) and an explanation of the specific information and documents that applicants must bring in for the intake interview. The IAR worker usually goes over the application form and the general requirements, addressing any specific questions applicants may have. The packet also includes information about the unannounced home visit to be made by a fraud investigator during the intake period. When appropriate, applicants also get Packet F, which includes information and forms for child support enforcement.

The IAR worker determines if applicants are employable (exemptions include child younger than 3 months, disability, caring for disabled person). IAR workers give applicants who must participate in San Diego County Welfare-to-Work (WTW) Program a WTW brochure and explain the Program. Non-exempt applicants fill out a child care assessment form that is forwarded to assigned employment case managers. Employable applicants are told to look for work during the application period and to make at least 8 job contacts. This is not a mandatory requirement for applicants, but many do make some or all of the 8 employer contacts and report them to the intake worker.

All applicants are entered on the automated SMART system. The SMART system allows the office to check the applicant’s use of services from other divisions of the San Diego County Health and Human Services agency. As mentioned above, applicants with service needs are referred to the in-office social service worker, who will follow up with the applicant.

When they complete the IAR interview, applicants are scheduled for an intake interview. The time for the appointment is based on need. That is, applicants needing expedited food stamps or cash assistance (for example, those facing eviction or utility shutoff) are given appointments within a few days or sooner. Others generally wait one to two weeks for the intake interview appointment.

In order to be certified, CalWORKS applicants must attend a program orientation and must be fingerprinted (using electronic finger-imaging), along with all adults in the assistance unit (applicants are given forms for finger-imaging during the IAR interview). The orientations are held daily in English (3 each day) and Spanish (2 each day) and last approximately one hour; attendance at the orientation is monitored. Finger imaging may be done at any time during business hours. Most applicants attend a program orientation the same day as the IAR interview.

Program Orientation

Program Orientations are held in a conference room near the front of the agency building. After a brief introduction by the orientation session leader, applicants are first shown videotape explaining the rights and responsibilities associated with CalWORKS. Among the rights mentioned are included:

- Freedom from discrimination based on race, gender, ethnicity;
- Certification period is 30 days;
- Applicants may appeal the agency’s decision;

³ There are some exceptions. For example, as discussed below, CalWORKS recipients with children younger than 3 months are exempt from the work requirements.

- Information about the applicant may be shared with other governmental agencies.

Among the responsibilities mentioned are included:

- The responsibility to seek and accept a job;
- The 60-month lifetime time limit for adults;
- The 30-35 hour per week work requirement;
- Proof of legal alien status or citizenship;
- Social Security card or application for one is required;
- Proof required for: bank accounts, earnings, rent, phone bill, utilities bills.

Other requirements include:

- A home visit for all CalWORKS applicants;
- Proof of school attendance for dependent children;
- Proof of immunizations for all children under 6.

CalWORKS participants are required to report:

- Any money from any source;
- Any employment changes;
- Any moves or household changes;
- Changes in rent or utility costs;
- Changes in immigration status;
- Property;
- Disabilities.

All CalWORKS and food stamp recipients must file a monthly income report within 5 days of the first of the month.

The second half of the orientation is devoted to health care options for Medi-Cal recipients. Typically, food stamp-only applicants do not attend this part of the orientation.

Intake Interview

When applicants show up for the intake interview that was scheduled during the IAR interview, they hand their application packages to a receptionist. The receptionist hands the packages to the intake clerk, who assigns the case on a rotating basis to an intake worker. The intake clerks also track all scheduled interviews and process cases of those applicants who do not appear for the scheduled interview without informing the agency. Those absent applicants have their cases denied and are sent a letter informing them of the action.

While applicants wait for the interview, intake workers review applications and highlight incomplete sections and missing items. Intake workers also make note of any parts of the application form or process that may need focus, such as the work requirement, or child support enforcement, for example.

Although there is some worker-to-worker and applicant-to-applicant variation, the typical intake interview proceeds through the various items in the application package in the order they appear. In addition to the information requested on the SAWS2, this also includes: signing a sheet acknowledging that applicants have read and understand recipient rights and responsibilities; explaining about direct deposit for CalWORKS checks; filling out the employment background form; explaining about monthly income reporting and the reporting form. Intake workers will review the child immunization form and the school attendance form for applicants who have not completed them.

Automated interactive interview screens that are available on the county's administrative system may guide the intake interview. Not all intake interviews use the automated system. Some interview rooms do not have computer terminals, and some workers prefer to go over the intake process manually and enter information into the AIS (Automated Intake System) system afterwards.

The Child Support Enforcement packet is normally reviewed during the intake interview. Intake interviewers review the information with applicants that have children with noncustodial parents and forward completed forms to an on-site child support specialist, who works with the district attorney's office. The child support worker reviews the paperwork and decides whether or not to interview the applicant. Applicants that do not complete the child support enforcement paperwork on the day of the intake interview are told to bring or mail in the paperwork at a later time. Applicants who do not complete the child support packet without good cause may be certified for CalWORKS, but will have their grant reduced by 25 percent until they comply.

Applicants that do not bring a required document or verification to the intake interview are given a list of everything they need to provide. They are given 20 days to complete their paperwork; that is, if the paperwork is not in after 10 days, they get a notice and are given an additional 10 days. If the paperwork is not received within the 20 days, the case is denied (note that the child immunization form is required within 45 days and the school attendance form is required by the end of the first full school month after the month of certification; otherwise eligible cases may receive cash assistance in the meantime). Applicants who return with the necessary paperwork within 30 days of being denied, will be returned to the same intake worker and continue with the original application.

Fraud Investigation

After the intake interview, applications are referred to a fraud investigator, who checks various case facts using various administrative systems, collateral contacts, and a home visit. All CalWORKS applicants require a home visit from an investigator, with the sole exception of a non-needy caretaker caring for a court-dependent child or children. In addition to the home visit to verify residence and family and household composition, the fraud investigator also conducts a number of computer matches, such as a match with the Department of Motor Vehicles and with a computer file of drug convictions, and may verify any information provided by the applicant.

The fraud investigator's home visit is unannounced. If an applicant is absent at the time of the visit, the investigator leaves a card telling the applicant to call to make an appointment for the home visit. If after a second visit the applicant does not respond to a second request to make an appointment, the case is denied.

While intake eligibility workers are waiting for applicants to provide any outstanding information or documents, they may track the progress and findings of the fraud investigator on an automated tracking system—the Fraud Referral and Tracking System (FRATS). Ultimately, the investigator’s finding and recommendation are communicated to eligibility technicians through FRATS.

According to a fraud investigation supervisor, staff complete about 3–4 investigations daily; most investigations are completed within 2–3 days of being referred to the fraud unit. The informant also reported that very few applicants do not comply with the home visit requirement, but that as many as 20–25 percent of applicants are denied assistance on the basis of the investigation. Most are denied either because they fail to appear for the home visit or because the address provided by the applicant is wrong or does not exist. Also note that although investigators work within the Public Assistance Fraud Division of the District Attorney’s office, applicants providing misinformation or failing to appear for the mandatory home visit are never referred for criminal investigations.⁴

Case Determination

Once an application has been completed (either certified or denied) it goes to an intake supervisor for review. Approved cases go back to the intake worker until they are “banked,” or opened. At that time, cases are forwarded to an ongoing worker for case maintenance and redeterminations. Denied cases go from the supervisory review to a Medi-Cal worker to determine eligibility for Medi-Cal. Denied applicants have 90 days to file an appeal and review of the decision.

Exhibit 9.2 below is a representation of the TANF application process in San Diego, with an emphasis on information exchanged and applicant decision points.

Historical Perspective

Although cash assistance policies have changed markedly since the end of the AFDC Program in San Diego County, much about the application process has remained the same. According to one informant, the basic structure and sequencing of application activities, including, for example, the IAR interview, program orientation, and intake interview have remained unchanged since the end of AFDC. Other than the content of the program description, a few details have been introduced since the end of AFDC. For example, the Personal Responsibility Agreement was developed for CalWORKS, California’s TANF Program. The immunization and school attendance requirements have also been introduced under TANF, although, as explained above, failure to meet these requirements may not necessarily hold up certification of an otherwise eligible CalWORKS case. Moreover, the SMART system is a recent innovation, although it likely has no effect on the application decision. Also, the opportunity for a diversionary cash payment in lieu of ongoing assistance was introduced with the implementation of CalWORKS. Finally, although fraud investigations had been part of the AFDC application process, the requirement that all applications be investigated was introduced after the end of the AFDC Program.

⁴ Of course, public assistance recipients who receive benefits under false pretenses are likely to trigger criminal proceedings.

Exhibit 9.2

Application Process: San Diego County, CA

Information/Decisions/ Results	Reception and Information , Assessment, and Referral (IAR), Program Orientation	Intake Interview	Pending Application Requirements							
Information Provided by Applicant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Purpose of visit Summary information about family and household resources, needs, employability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demographic information Family and household composition Income, assets, resources Prior welfare experience 	Fraud Investigation and Home Visit	Other Pending Application Requirements						
Information Provided by Agency	IAR Interview: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assistance programs, benefits, and sources available at agency relevant to applicant's situation; diversion assistance; other agencies that may help meet needs Employment requirements Program Orientation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> General requirements for application process Client rights and responsibilities TANF Program requirements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pending application requirements Likely eligibility Likely benefits Conditions for receiving benefits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Applicant is questioned in home by fraud investigator; other applicant information may be checked 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All adults in assistance unit are finger-imaged Applicant completes application and provides all necessary verifications 						
Applicant Decisions:	Whether to sign and file application <div style="text-align: center;"> </div>	Whether to proceed with application <div style="text-align: center;"> </div>	Whether to cooperate with fraud investigation and complete pending application requirements within timeframe <div style="text-align: center;"> </div>							
Application Results:	<table border="0" style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%;">Applicant does not begin process</td> <td style="width: 50%;">Applicant signs form; attends IAR interview and receives application packets; may decide to accept diversionary assistance or attend Program Orientation; schedules an intake interview</td> </tr> </table>	Applicant does not begin process	Applicant signs form; attends IAR interview and receives application packets; may decide to accept diversionary assistance or attend Program Orientation; schedules an intake interview	<table border="0" style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%;">May be referred to other programs or service providers</td> <td style="width: 50%;">Proceeds with application; given 30 days to complete requirements; application is entered into administrative system</td> </tr> </table>	May be referred to other programs or service providers	Proceeds with application; given 30 days to complete requirements; application is entered into administrative system	TANF denied due to incomplete application; other benefits denied or granted	<table border="0" style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%;">TANF benefits granted to eligible applicants</td> <td style="width: 50%;">TANF benefits denied due to circumstantial ineligibility; other benefits denied or granted</td> </tr> </table>	TANF benefits granted to eligible applicants	TANF benefits denied due to circumstantial ineligibility; other benefits denied or granted
Applicant does not begin process	Applicant signs form; attends IAR interview and receives application packets; may decide to accept diversionary assistance or attend Program Orientation; schedules an intake interview									
May be referred to other programs or service providers	Proceeds with application; given 30 days to complete requirements; application is entered into administrative system									
TANF benefits granted to eligible applicants	TANF benefits denied due to circumstantial ineligibility; other benefits denied or granted									

Applicant Decision Points

There are several points in the San Diego County TANF application process at which prospective applicants and applicants may decide to break off from the application process or may be denied benefits. For example, on the day of initial contact, prospective applicants may learn enough from receptionists to screen themselves out of TANF. In fact, however, once having appeared at the office, it is likely that most individuals sign the SAWS1 and become official applicants. Moreover, since the wait for an IAR interview is relatively brief, it is unlikely that applicants will not stay for the interview. Some applicants may be denied TANF benefits on the basis of information provided during the IAR screening; those applicants may continue to apply for food stamps or Medicaid. Finally, most applicants who sit through an IAR screening will stay for a mandatory orientation, although some may miss the scheduled orientations for that day and return on another day or fail to reappear.

Once TANF applicants have completed an IAR screening and attended an orientation, they must comply with several behavioral and informational requirements. For example, all adults in the TANF case must be finger-imaged. Also, applicants must provide necessary verifications and complete an intake interview. Finally, all applicants must be present for a home visit from a fraud investigator and must pass the investigation. In our review of a sample of prospective applicants and applicants in San Diego, we measured how many in the study sample took the following steps:

- Sign SAWS1 (formal application)
- Complete IAR interview
- Accept diversionary assistance
- Sign Personal Responsibility Agreement
- Attend orientation
- Complete finger-imaging for all adults in case
- Attend intake interview
- Complete home visit by fraud investigator
- Provide all necessary verifications

TANF Application Decisions, Experiences, and Outcomes in San Diego County

This section presents findings on the application decisions, experiences, and outcomes of a sample of individuals appearing at the Southeast office of the San Diego Department of Health and Human Services (SDDHHS) with a potential interest in applying for TANF and other program benefits. The findings are based on the follow-up interviews and case record reviews.

Applicants and Applicant Decisions

The study collected information on individuals with an interest in TANF that appeared at the SDDHHS from 10/29/01 – 2/15/02. A random, stratified sample of these individuals was surveyed by telephone from 3 to 9 months after entering the study sample by appearing at the welfare office and signing a contact sheet. Exhibit 9.3 summarizes their TANF application decisions and results.

Exhibit 9.3**TANF Application Decisions and Results: San Diego County, CA (n = 201)^a**

Certified TANF Applicants (%)	45.6
Uncertified TANF Applicants (%)	46.9
Nonapplicants (%)	7.5
Applicants receiving Diversionary Assistance (%)	0.0

Source: Case Record Review

^a Percentages weighted by stratum size.

Exhibit 9.4 displays selected socio-economic and demographic characteristics of the individuals and families with an interest in TANF that appeared at the SDDHHS Southeast welfare office. The exhibit presents weighted means and frequencies for the total research sample, as well as statistics for each study stratum.

As Exhibit 9.4 shows, the average family in the study sample has less than 2 children, although far more than half of the households include other (non-caretaker) adults, bringing the average household size up to almost 5 persons. Almost 90 percent of the families are headed by a single parent, and only a small percentage own their own home.

There are some expected differences between the certified and the uncertified groups. For example, uncertified families are twice as likely as certified families to include an employed person. This is further reflected in the fact that at the time of application, uncertified families reported incomes significantly higher than certified families by about 54 percent, or \$223.

The follow-up survey included questions about the major reason individuals had for coming to the welfare office to ask about, or apply for, cash benefits. The results for San Diego County are presented in Exhibit 9.5, below. The prevalent major reason for seeking assistance reported by individuals at the SDDHHD Southeast office is a loss of income (46 percent), with unemployment being the most common event behind that loss. Uncertified families were more than twice as likely as certified families to list a general loss of income (as opposed to a loss of employment) as the major reason for seeking assistance. Conversely, certified families were twice as likely to list “respondent or child became ill or pregnant” (20 percent) as the major reason for applying for cash assistance.

Exhibit 9.4**Selected Characteristics of Prospective TANF Applicants: San Diego County, CA**

Individual, Family, or Household (HH) Characteristic	Total Research Sample^a (n = 201)	Certified for TANF (n = 100)	Uncertified for TANF (n = 101)
Age of prospective applicant (mean years)	29.6	29.2	29.9
Ethnicity of prospective applicant (%):			
Hispanic	52	52	51
Non-Hispanic:			
White	5	5	6
African-American	29	31	28
Asian, Pacific Islander, or Native American	8	6	9
Multi-ethnic/Other	6	5	6
Persons in HH (mean)	4.8	4.9	4.7
Children in family (mean)	1.9	1.8	2.0
Families living with other adults in HH (%)	63	67	59
Prospective applicant's marital status (%)			
Married	12	10	14
Separated	23	17	28*
Divorced/Widowed	11	13	9
Never married	54	60	49
Family's living situation (%)			
Own house	2	3	1
Rent	45	39	50
Live with others and do not pay rent	15	11	19
Live with others and pay rent	34	43	27**
Other (Includes shelter)	4	4	4
Public housing or Section 8 (%)	17	21	14
Educational attainment of prospective applicant (%)			
Less than HS	43	43	43
HS or GED only	30	31	28
Trade school or license	5	4	5
Trade school or license and HS or GED	18	17	19
College degree	5	4	6
HH with employed member (%)	24	15	31***
Family receives child support income (%)	13	10	15
Monthly income available to family (mean) ^b	\$544	\$421	\$644***

Source: Follow-up Survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

^a Percentages weighted by stratum size.^b "Income" includes earned and unearned income available to the family to meet monthly expenses.

Exhibit 9.5**Major Reason for Seeking Assistance: San Diego County, CA**

Major reason (%)	All (n = 201) ^f	Certified (n = 100)	Uncertified (n = 101)
Prospective applicant or other adult in household lost a job	32	34	31
Household lost income ^a	14	8	19**
It became too hard to make ends meet ^b	15	16	15
Household composition changed ^c	14	12	16
Prospective applicant or child became ill or pregnant ^d	14	20	10**
Family moved	4	7	2*
Other ^e	6	3	8

Source: Follow-up Survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

^a “Household lost income” includes the following responses: prospective applicant or other adult in household started earning less money from a job; prospective applicant lost some other type of income; financial help from a friend or relative stopped; and, no income/lost income.

^b “It became too hard to make ends meet” includes the following responses: rent, mortgage, or utilities went up; it was getting harder and harder to make ends meet; and, needed to supplement income/needed income to support kids.

^c “Household composition changed” includes the following responses: number of people in household increased; separation from spouse/partner; and, household member died.

^d “Prospective applicant or child became ill or pregnant” includes the following responses: prospective applicant became sick or disabled; child became sick or disabled; and, pregnancy.

^e “Other” includes the following responses: encouraged by office to apply for cash assistance when applying for other benefits; wanted Medicaid or Food Stamp benefits; seeking assistance – related to transportation or unspecified; homeless; in school/student; and, other.

^f Percentages weighted by stratum size.

Among the research sample in San Diego County, about 7.5 percent decided not to apply for cash assistance after appearing at the welfare office for information. When asked the main reason why they decided not to apply, about 55 percent of these individuals believed that they had incomes too high to qualify. Others answered that they missed an interview, or did not provide verifications.

Application Experiences

In an effort to understand the activities required to complete the TANF application in San Diego County, as well to observe how far uncertified applicants progressed through the application process, the study used the case record reviews to measure the number of specific requirements for each TANF applicant. Exhibit 9.6 presents findings on the proportion of applicants facing specific behavioral and informational requirements described earlier in this chapter, as well as the proportion fulfilling each requirement. As the exhibit shows, very few of the uncertified sample members

actually complete all of the steps in the application process, with only 29 percent actually completing the home visit fraud investigation and only 25 percent providing all necessary verifications.

Exhibit 9.6

TANF Application Requirements—Percentage Completed: San Diego County, CA

Application Requirement (<i>NOTE:</i> In San Diego, all applicants must fulfill the listed requirements)	All Applicants (n = 187) ^a	Certified Applicants (n = 100)	Uncertified Applicants (n = 87)
Percentage completed			
Sign SAWS1	100	100	100
IAR interview	99	100	99
Sign Personal Responsibility Agreement	86	100	72***
Attend orientation	82	100	56***
Finger-imaging	72	100	44***
Attend intake interview	70	100	41***
Complete home visit	64	100	29***
Provide all required verifications	62	100	25***

Source: Case record review

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

^a Percentages weighted by stratum size; data include applicants only

NA = not applicable

Exhibit 9.7 affords a more dynamic illustration of the degree to which prospective and actual applicants complete each step in the process.⁵ The exhibit presents the probability that any research sample member appearing at the welfare office will complete a sequenced step in the application process (first line across), as well as the conditional probability that once reaching a given step, an individual will move on to the next steps or outcome in the process. The table in Exhibit 9.7 includes fewer steps in the application process than Exhibit 9.6 because 4.7 is restricted to sequenced steps.

⁵ Note that individuals are considered to have completed a step in the process if they fulfilled the specific step's requirements or if they were exempt from those requirements. Note also that individuals with missing data for any of the application steps are not included in the analysis.

Exhibit 9.7**Probability of Advancing Through Steps in the Application Process: San Diego County, CA (n = 199)^a**

Step in Process	Step in Process				
	Sign SAWS1	IAR Interview	Intake Interview	Home Visit	Certified for TANF
Appear at office	.92	.92	.65	.59	.46
Sign SAWS1		.99	.70	.64	.49
IAR interview			.71	.65	.50
Intake interview				.92	.70
Home visit					.77

^a Percentages weighted by stratum size.

Reading the table in Exhibit 9.7 from left to right indicates the probability that an individual who has reached the step in the left hand column will complete each of the remaining steps and become certified. For example, the table shows that those that complete the intake interview have a 92 percent chance of completing the home visit and a 70 percent chance of becoming certified for TANF.

Reading the table down each column indicates the probability that an individual who completes the step in each row will also complete the step in the column. For example, 70 percent of the individuals who sign an application also complete the intake interview. Similarly, 65 percent of the individuals who complete the IAR interview also complete the home visit. The Exhibit indicates that the biggest dropoff in the process is after the IAR interview; almost 30 percent of the individuals in our sample fail to show up for an intake interview after the IAR interview.

In the follow-up survey, respondents were asked whether or not they thought they were eligible for TANF at the time they appeared at the SDDHHS Southeast office. Results are presented in Exhibit 9.8. Overall, about three-quarters of the applicants reported that they believed themselves to be eligible for TANF when they went to the office. Curiously, uncertified applicants were actually more likely to believe themselves eligible for cash assistance (82 percent versus 63 percent for certified applicants). This is similar to patterns evident in other study sites.

The follow-up survey sought to measure applicants' satisfaction with the application process. In particular, two survey questions focused on applicant opinions about the adequacy of information and office assistance in negotiating the application process. One question asked respondents how well they understood the application process and its requirements and another asked their opinions about the adequacy of office staff assistance in negotiating the application process. Results are presented in Exhibit 9.9 for those that responded to these items.

Exhibit 9.8**Pre-Application Ideas About Eligibility: San Diego County, CA**

Applicant's Ideas About Likely Eligibility (%)	Total (n = 201)^a	Certified (n = 100)	Uncertified (n = 101)
Believed to be eligible	74	63	82***
Believed to be ineligible	14	22	8***
Was not sure	12	15	10

Source: Follow-up Survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

^a Percentages weighted by stratum size

Exhibit 9.9**Applicant Opinions About the Application Process and Staff Assistance: San Diego County, CA**

Opinions About Application Process and Office Staff	Total (n = 145)^a	Certified (n = 62)	Uncertified (n = 83)
How well did applicant understand application process (%):			
Really understood	67	74	63
Somewhat unsure	22	18	25
No idea at all	10	8	12
How much of the help you needed was provided by office staff (%):			
All	37	47	31*
Most	27	32	23
Only some	26	19	30
None	10	2	16***

Source: Follow-up survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

^a Percentages weighted by stratum size

As the exhibit shows, about two-thirds of all respondents reported that they “really understood” the process, with no differences observed between the uncertified and certified groups. Moreover, a relatively small proportion of survey respondents answered that they “had no idea at all” about the application process. When asked about how helpful office staff were in assisting them through the application process, 65 percent overall answered that office staff provided all or most of the assistance applicants felt they needed. However, as the exhibit shows, and consistent with findings for

Mercer County and Ramsey County, the uncertified respondents were less likely to report that staff provided all the needed help. Again, note that uncertified applicants are more likely to be dissatisfied with the process, particularly when so many of them felt that they qualified for TANF when they applied (see Exhibit 9.8 above).

Application Outcomes

Observing TANF application outcomes, both at the time of application and at the time of the follow-up interview several months later, may provide insights into whether the application process may be deterring otherwise eligible individuals from applying for, or completing an application for, TANF benefits. As described earlier in this chapter, San Diego County has a formal TANF diversionary assistance program, targeted on families needing immediate assistance to continue or to begin employment. As indicated above in Exhibit 9.3, however, no one in our research sample received diversionary assistance in place of ongoing CalWORKS cash assistance.

Before investigating the likelihood of informal diversion, we present findings about the benefit programs and benefits that TANF applicants in our study were able to access. The results regarding benefits are presented in Exhibit 9.10. The exhibit illustrates the important finding that even though none of the uncertified sample was eligible for TANF benefits, some of them were newly certified for food stamps and Medicaid.

Exhibit 9.10

Application Outcomes: Benefits, San Diego County, CA

Benefit Outcome	Total (n = 201) ^a	Certified (n = 100)	Uncertified (n = 101)
Mean monthly TANF benefit	N/A	\$452	N/A
Newly certified for food stamps (%)	36	70	9***
Mean monthly food stamp benefit (for newly certified)	\$210	\$208	\$217
Newly certified for Medicaid (%)	22	42	6***

Source: Case record review

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

^a Percentages weighted by stratum size

Exhibit 9.11 presents findings about why uncertified cases were denied for TANF cash assistance. These results are based on the case record review and represent the “official” administrative reason for denial. As the exhibit shows, 46 percent of the uncertified applicants were denied assistance for reasons other than failing to meet a behavioral requirement.⁶ The other 54 percent of uncertified

⁶ That is, 46 percent were denied assistance because of one of the following reasons: too much income, too many assets, no eligible child, receiving TANF in another county, unable to verify residency, or no deprivation factor found.

applicants were denied assistance because they either chose not to, or could not, fulfill some behavioral or informational requirement.

Exhibit 9.11

Reasons for Denial of Uncertified Cases: San Diego County, CA

Reason for Denial (%)	Percentage of Uncertified Applicants (n = 87)
Denied for circumstances: too much income	22
Denied for circumstances: too many assets	6
Denied for circumstances: other	0
No eligible child	7
Receiving TANF in another county	2
Unable to verify residency	1
No deprivation factor	8
Failure to keep scheduled appointments	34
Failure to provide verifications or required documentation	2
Voluntary withdrawal	14
Other reason	3
Reason not indicated in case record	0

Source: Case record review

When interpreting these results, it is important to note first that caseworkers are not always accurate in selecting a reason for denial, but only that some reason must be selected in order to complete casework on the application. Second, some applicants who failed to complete the application process may have done so because of a belief that they would be found ineligible on other grounds. The follow-up survey included an item designed to measure the extent to which those who failed to complete the application believed that they would be found ineligible for circumstances. Responses from the survey are summarized in Exhibit 9.12.

When combined with the results from the case record review presented in Exhibit 9.11, the findings in Exhibit 9.12 indicate that some of the applicants who failed to complete the process did so because they thought they would not be found eligible (“too much income,” “too many assets”). On the other hand, others simply listed as their main reason for failing to complete the process the particular behavioral or informational requirement with which they did not comply.

In assessing the degree to which otherwise needy families may have been informally diverted from filing or completing the application, the follow-up survey asked respondents about their current situations and how things have changed since appearing at the San Diego County DHHS office (approximately 3 to 9 months later, depending on the time of appearance at the office and the date of the telephone interview). Results are presented in Exhibit 9.13.

Exhibit 9.12**Reported Main Reason for Failure to Complete Application: San Diego County, CA**

Main Reason (%)	Percentage of Uncertified Applicants Who Failed to Complete Application^a (n = 46)
Too much income	16
Found a job	0
Too many assets	2
No dependent children	0
Missed interview	18
Did not provide verifications	25
Did not cooperate with child support enforcement	2
Decided not to complete the process	11
Other	25

^a Includes answer to survey question about reasons for being denied *only* for applicants denied assistance due to: failure to keep appointments; failure to provide necessary documentation; voluntary withdrawal; other reason; no reason indicated.

Source: Follow-up survey

Exhibit 9.13**Family Status at Follow-up and Changes Since Applying for TANF: San Diego County, CA**

Current Status or Change	All (n = 201)^a	Certified (n = 100)	Uncertified (n = 101)
Participation in assistance programs (%)			
Currently receives TANF benefits	49	88	18***
Currently receives food stamps	43	69	23***
Currently receives Medicaid	65	78	54***
Currently receives WIC	49	51	49
Child currently receives subsidized school meals (Among households with school-age children)	86 (n = 110)	88 (n = 51)	85 (n = 59)
Employment status and changes			
Currently employed (%)	37	33	40
Mean hours worked (employed only)	34 hours	33 hours	35 hours
Left employment since applying (%)	4	4	5
Found employment since applying (%)	18	22	15
Employed at both time points (%)	19	11	25***
Employed at neither time point (%)	49	63	55
Change reported in (%):			
Household size	33	30	35
Marital status	4	3	4
Housing situation	23	27	19
Current income and changes in income^b			
Current mean monthly income available to family	\$839	\$837	\$840
Change in monthly income since applying	301	398	219**
Change in overall financial situation since applying (%)			
Better now	54	63	48**
Worse now	16	11	20*
Same	30	26	32

Source: Follow-up survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

^a Percentages weighted by stratum size.^b "Income" includes all earned and unearned income available to the family to meet monthly expenses.

Overall, unlike the situation in Mercer County, NJ and Ramsey County, MN, uncertified families are no better off than certified families at follow up, nor are they more likely to be employed. This apparently contradictory result may be due to California’s slightly higher benefit guarantee and slightly more generous earned income disregard, which allows families to remain on TANF at higher income levels than in other sites. More in keeping with the general pattern found in Mercer and Ramsey Counties, however, uncertified families in San Diego were far less likely than certified families to be receiving TANF, food stamp, or Medicaid insurance benefits at follow-up.

Also following the pattern of the Mercer and Ramsey County research sample, both certified and uncertified families in San Diego had experienced improvements in average income since appearing at the welfare office. Again, this pattern is to be expected, since individuals usually apply for welfare at the time of a financial loss or downturn. Curiously, the reported increases in average monthly incomes were less for uncertified families. Also, uncertified families were less likely than certified families to report that their situation had improved. When family incomes reported at follow-up are compared to incomes reported at the time families first appeared at the welfare office (as opposed to asking respondents directly whether or not they are better off now), certified families were indeed more likely than uncertified families to have experienced an increase in monthly income of more than \$100, as indicated in Exhibit 9.14.

Exhibit 9.14

Changes in Family Financial Status Based on Reported Income at Application and at Follow-up: San Diego County, CA

Change in Financial Status (%)	Certified (n = 100)	Uncertified (n =101)
Better off: reported monthly income increased by more than \$100	65	53*
Worse off: reported monthly income decreased by more than \$100	9	12
The same: no change of more than \$100 in monthly income	26	34

Source: Follow-up survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

In a final analysis designed to indicate the potential for otherwise needy families to be deterred from applying for, or completing the application for TANF, we compare the follow-up monthly incomes of certified clients, non-applicants, and applicants who did not complete the process. Because some of the groups are so small and may vary greatly by family size, we present per capita monthly incomes. We also compare the employment rates for these three groups at the time of the follow-up interview. Results for individuals who responded to these questions in the follow-up survey are shown in Exhibit 9.15.

As the exhibit shows, non-applicants at follow-up have the same income in statistical terms as do certified applicants. If the appropriate families are deciding not to apply, one would expect their incomes to be the same as, or higher than, the incomes of certified applicants. Instead, however, applicants who did not complete the TANF application have statistically lower monthly incomes at follow-up than do certified applicants. Moreover, neither applicant noncompleters nor non-applicants

are more likely to be employed at follow-up than certified applicants. These findings are *prima facie* evidence that families who decide not to, or who are unable to, complete the TANF application are worse off financially than families certified for TANF. Note that this finding does not by itself demonstrate informal diversion of otherwise eligible families, but only that families who appear to be eligible on the basis of income are not completing the application process. This may be due to informal diversion, to a recognition by families that they may be ineligible for other reasons, or to a decision not to complete the process for other reasons.⁷

Exhibit 9.15

Reported Family Per Capita Monthly Income at Follow-Up: San Diego County, CA

	Certified Applicants (n = 94)	Applicant Non-Completers (n = 45)	Non-Applicants (n = 12)
Per capita monthly income	\$300	\$210***	\$396
Percent employed at follow-up	33%	33%	46%

Source: Follow-up survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

Concluding Observations

This concluding section addresses the three major research questions for the case studies in the context of the TANF application process in San Diego County, California. Those questions include:

How does the TANF intake and application process operate in selected local TANF Program offices and how has it changed since the end of the AFDC Program?

In San Diego County, few application policies and procedures have changed since the implementation of TANF. New behavioral requirements include signing a Personal Responsibility Agreement and requiring proof of immunizations and school attendance for dependent children, although failure to meet the latter requirements may not necessarily hold up certification of an otherwise eligible CalWORKS case. Also, the opportunity for a diversionary cash payment in lieu of ongoing assistance was introduced with the implementation of CalWORKS, though applicants rarely choose this option. Finally, although fraud investigations had been part of the AFDC application process, the requirement that all applications be investigated was introduced after the end of the AFDC Program. Eligibility staff at the Southwest Office of the San Diego DHHS confirmed that little in the eligibility process had changed since the end of the AFDC Program, or that the eligibility process by itself had much effect on individuals' decisions to apply for TANF or to complete the process.

⁷ In fact, in San Diego County in particular, families who choose not to complete the process may be ineligible by reason of alien citizenship, regardless of their financial circumstances.

What is the potential for individuals to be formally or informally diverted from filing or completing TANF applications in selected TANF offices?

As in Mercer and Ramsey County, any formal or informal diversion in San Diego is most likely to occur *after* an individual files an application for CalWORKS. The formal way in which applicants may be diverted from TANF benefits is with a Diversionary Assistance grant. The grant may be awarded to individuals who need a one-time payment or service to maintain or secure employment. In our research sample for the study, no individuals applied for Diversionary Assistance in San Diego. Anecdotally, the new requirement that all applications be investigated for fraud has screened out more applicants from certification than would have been the case under the former system. According to staff, the mandatory fraud investigation has apparently not deterred important numbers of individuals from applying for TANF initially, however.

What is the evidence concerning the possible contribution of changes in the application process to changes in individuals' decisions to apply and to complete the application process?

Among individuals with children appearing at the Southwest office of the San Diego County Department of Health and Human Services, 92.5 percent filed applications for TANF and 7.5 percent did not; 45.6 percent of the research sample families were certified for TANF, and another 46.9 percent applied, but were not certified. Information about the contribution of changes in the application process to changes in decisions to file and complete an application come from three main sources: the informed opinion of caseworkers; applicant reports about their motivation and expectations in the application decision and process; and applicant behavior as reflected in the case record. We consider the evidence from these sources below.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, staff interviewed for the study felt that the reasons individuals may have for deciding not to apply, or not to complete the application, are largely not directly related to application policies or procedures introduced under TANF. The one possible exception is the requirement that every CalWORKS applicant undergo a fraud investigation, including a mandatory home visit. According to eligibility and investigative staff, this new requirement has screened out some applicants who may have otherwise been certified under AFDC application policy.

Combining results from the follow-up survey with results from the case record reviews provides some statistical evidence about the potential for formal and informal diversion. Most notably, no applicants in our research sample received a diversionary cash payment during the more than four months observed by the study. Evidence concerning informal diversion is more difficult to pinpoint. For example, about 7 percent of the sample of individuals with children appearing at the Southwest office decided not to apply for TANF. Over half of them felt that their incomes were too high to qualify. But another 45 percent of the nonapplicants offered a variety of reasons for deciding not to apply. Nonapplicants' per capita monthly income at follow-up is \$396, statistically the same as the per capita monthly income of certified applicants. Given their average financial situation at follow-up, therefore, there is no *prima facie* evidence that, on average, otherwise eligible or needy families are being deterred from filing applications (nonapplicants) for TANF.

When focusing on uncertified applicants for signs of diversion, about 53 percent did not complete enough of the application process to be denied for circumstances. Of those who did not complete the application, about 39 percent felt that they would not qualify on the basis of income or assets. The

remainder offered a variety of main reasons why they did not complete the application. Families who did not complete the TANF application have monthly per capita incomes at follow-up of \$210, or about one-third less than the monthly per capita income of certified applicants. The fact that applicant non-completers are on average less well-off than families who were found eligible for TANF may be due to a number of reasons, including informal diversion.

Chapter Ten: The TANF Application Process and Results in Providence, Rhode Island

Overview and Context

Rhode Island’s TANF Program is known as the Family Independence Program (FIP). The Rhode Island Department of Human Services (DHS) administers FIP. FIP was established with the passage of Rhode Island’s Family Independence Act of July 1996. FIP was implemented on May 1, 1997.

Exhibit 10.1

Overview of Rhode Island TANF Policy^a

<i>Time Limit</i>	Lifetime eligibility limit of 60 months
<i>Time Limit Exemptions or Extensions</i>	Exemptions for: parents or caretakers older than 60, disabled parents or caretakers, those caring for a disabled family or household member, caretaker is not the parent of eligible child, individuals working at least 30 hours per week, or victims of domestic violence. Extensions for cases that meet the federal hardship standards or are victims of domestic violence. Children are not subject to the time limit.
<i>Family Cap Provision</i>	No family cap provision
<i>Work Requirements</i>	Participants are required to engage in work activities no later than 2 months after first receiving assistance.
<i>Work Activities</i>	Single-parent families are required to participate in work activities for 20 hours per week. Two-parent families are required to work at least 35 hours per week. ^b
<i>Work Activity Exemptions and Deferrals</i>	Recipients may be exempt from the work requirements if they are either in the 3 rd trimester of a pregnancy; single parents caring for children less than 1 year old; the primary caregivers to a disabled family member; older than 59; incapacitated and not able to work; or victims of domestic violence.
<i>Earned Income Disregard</i>	First \$170 plus 50 percent of remaining earnings

^a Policies prevailing at the time a sample was drawn for the study (1/02–3/02).

^b This varies according to whether or not the parents are receiving federal child care subsidies. Two-parent families who receive federal child care subsidies must work a combined 55 hours per week.

FIP includes a 60-month lifetime eligibility limit. During the first 24 months of receiving cash assistance, non-exempt recipients have a variety of options that may count towards the fulfillment of their work requirement. These options include, for example: working for 20 hours per week in a paid job or a community work experience placement; participating in a DHS-approved training or work-readiness program; engaging in supervised job search; attending school or participating in an

equivalency program;¹ and engaging in education and training activities judged to enhance employability (examples are ESL classes and vocational training).² After receiving cash assistance for 24 months, non-exempt recipients must engage in employment for at least 20 hours per week. The time limit clock is stopped for each month in which a recipient works at least 30 hours per week on average for the month.

The FIP earned income disregard is more generous than disregards under AFDC. The new income guidelines allow recipients to retain the first \$170 per month of gross earnings, with earnings over \$170 leading to a \$1 deduction in FIP benefits for every \$2 earned. Under the AFDC program, the earned income disregard was \$90 per month plus \$30 and 1/3 of earned income above \$90.

Application Process

The office chosen for the case study is the Providence Regional Family Center. It is located in a mixed business and residential section of the city, a few miles from the downtown area.

Overview of the Application Process

As mentioned above, the application process in Providence includes no pre-certification behavioral requirements. Applicants are given basic program information at a screening interview and more in-depth information at an intake interview. At no point during the application process are applicants assessed for work-readiness or barriers to work. These issues are addressed in a comprehensive assessment that is conducted once applicants are approved for FIP benefits.

Individuals visiting the Family Center and requesting aid receive an application form (DHS-1) from the reception desk. Once this form is filled out, reception staff are responsible for referring clients to social workers for a screening interview. During this interview, social workers review the application form and discuss potential eligibility with clients. All clients wishing to continue the application process are given an appointment for an intake interview and a longer form (DHS-2) asking for more detailed information about personal and family circumstances. Others may decide not to file the DHS-1 and formally apply.

Applicants return to the office for their scheduled intake interview with the DHS-2 form completely or partially filled out. Eligibility technicians review the form and work with applicants to fill in any missing information. The purpose of the intake interview is to provide eligibility technicians the information they need to make an eligibility decision. At the end of the intake interview, applicants are given a list of any outstanding documentation that eligibility technicians will need to process their applications.

After the intake interview is complete, and any outstanding documentation is provided, eligibility technicians are responsible for making eligibility decisions. Approved clients return to the office for an assessment of employability, educational level, and family needs. These assessments are conducted by social workers and are used to formulate an Individual Development Plan. This

¹ This option is open to recipients who are less than 20 years old and do not have a high school diploma or its equivalent.

² This option is open to recipients who are 20 years of age or older.

document serves as a road map for clients' behavioral expectations during their first 24 months on FIP.

Office Environment

The Providence Regional Family Center is located in southwest Providence. The Center provides most benefit programs at one central location. The programs offered at this office include the Family Independence Program (FIP), Food Stamps, Medicaid, subsidized child care, long-term care, General Assistance, and adult services for SSI recipients. The office is organized by target service populations. For example, programs that serve children and families are generally located on the first floor; programs that serve adults only are on the second floor. This service delivery model is being replicated throughout Rhode Island. The co-location of so many programs may help explain the steady flow of clients at this office. At no point during our visit was the waiting area empty.

The caseload served by this office is very diverse. Approximately forty percent of FIP recipients are not native English speakers. Languages commonly spoken by recipients include: Spanish, Cambodian, Hmong-Lao, and Portuguese. Providence has been a gateway community for several generations of immigrants. Providence is also an easy drive from several other states and its relatively lenient TANF Program has apparently attracted in-migrants from nearby states.

Reception

All individuals entering the Providence Regional Family Center check in at a desk in the reception area. Individuals wishing to learn about, or apply for, FIP benefits are directed to the left side of this desk. Potential applicants are asked if they have any children. Individuals answering "no" are told that they are not eligible for FIP, but that they may be eligible for other programs. Individuals answering "yes" are given an application form (DHS-1) to fill out. Applicants generally fill this form out on-site, with a few applicants taking it home with them and bringing the completed form back at a later date. The DHS-1 asks for name and address, as well as other relevant information, including, for example; history of public assistance receipt; family and household composition; reasons for applying for FIP; and, current income and other assets. If applicants have questions regarding the DHS-1, reception desk staff can call on caseworkers to assist them.

After completing the DHS-1, applicants return to the reception desk where a worker arranges a screening interview for them. These interviews are almost always done on the day that the DHS-1 is filled out, as long as the form is filled out before about 3 P.M. For applicants missing this cut-off time, a screening interview is usually scheduled for the next business day. A social worker and an eligibility technician are sent to the home of any applicant who cannot travel to the office due to disability.

Workers Involved in the FIP Application Process

The two types of workers that interview FIP applicants are social workers and eligibility technicians. Social workers assess applicants' needs and advise them about programs to which they should apply. Once applicants are certified for FIP, social workers determine whether or not they are exempt from work requirements and assess the education and training needs of nonexempt clients. Social workers are also responsible for assisting non-exempt clients in meeting their FIP work participation and other requirements.

Eligibility technicians are responsible for making an eligibility decision based on the information provided by applicants. Eligibility technicians are also responsible for monitoring clients' eligibility and benefit amounts.

Screening Interviews

Applicants are assigned to social workers for a screening interview after they fill out a DHS-1 in the reception area. The assignment is made on a rotating basis. Social workers are responsible for conducting screening interviews one day out of six. Social workers escort applicants from the reception area back to one of three screening rooms. Usually, the screening interview begins with a review of the DHS-1. If any information is missing, social workers help applicants complete the DHS-1. Applicants who appear not to be eligible for FIP are informed of this fact. These applicants are usually encouraged to apply for other benefits for which they may be eligible (such as Medicaid, food stamps, or subsidized child care, for example).

The next step in the screening interview is to discuss some of the details of the FIP program. Topics covered usually include, for example: FIP work requirements and the reasons clients may qualify for an exemption from the requirements; applicants' living situation; the reasons to claim a good cause exemption from cooperating with child support enforcement; and any other issues applicants may raise. At this point, applicants have a very general description of the program; a more detailed description of the program and its requirements is given later at the intake interview. Applicants usually sign the DHS-1 form at some point during the screening interview, thereby becoming official FIP applicants. The screening interview is also the point at which applicants are assigned a case number and entered into the agency's automated administrative system.

Applicants who are minors living alone are referred to the Adolescent Self-Sufficiency Collaborative. Under contract with the Department of Human Services, this group of service agencies is responsible for conducting a home assessment of all minor applicants living alone to determine whether or not their living situation is appropriate. Applicants whose living situations are deemed appropriate may continue with the application process. For minor applicants whose living situations are deemed inappropriate, the contractor will work to stabilize their living situation. This is usually accomplished by placing minor applicants back in their parents' home or in a group home for teenagers.

Screening interviews last approximately twenty minutes. At the end of the interview, applicants are given information on the other services available to them, including, for example, domestic violence counseling and substance abuse counseling. Applicants are also given the DHS-2 at the conclusion of the screening interview. This form covers many of the same items addressed in the DHS-1. The DHS-1 is the official application form while the DHS-2 is a more extensive form for the information that is needed to make eligibility decisions. The DHS-1 is a 3-page form, while the DHS-2 is 21 pages in length. The DHS-1 provides basic information regarding applicants' circumstances, while the DHS-2 provides a comprehensive view of applicants' income, family and household composition, and benefit history.

Social workers spend some time going over the DHS-2 to give applicants an overview of the information and documentation they must provide. The DHS-2 includes a list of documents applicants must bring to their intake interview. The requested items are used to establish family and household composition and financial resources. Before applicants leave the office, an intake interview

is scheduled for them. This interview must take place not more than 5 business days after the screening interview. Social workers have access to an intake interview sign-up sheet that shows eligibility technicians' availability.

Intake Interviews

Applicants returning to the office for their intake interview must first check in at the front desk with the receptionist responsible for applications and appointments. The front-desk staff check to make sure that applicants have an appointment scheduled. Applicants with appointments are met in the reception area by the eligibility technician assigned to their case. Applicants are then escorted back to the eligibility technician's cubicle. Intake interviews begin with eligibility technicians going over each question on the DHS-2 form to make sure that the information provided is complete and accurate. The length of intake interviews usually varies from 45 minutes to 2 hours, depending on the complexity of the applicant's situation.

If there are any suspicions regarding the information provided by the client on the DHS-2, eligibility technicians may make a referral to the FRED (Front End Detection) unit. FRED workers make home visits to all applicants referred to them. After completing home visits, FRED workers report back to the eligibility unit supervisor who forwards the reports to the appropriate eligibility technicians. Applicants may be referred to a FRED worker if any of the following conditions are present:

- Fixed expenses (rent, utilities, etc.) exceed reported income and no reasonable explanation is given;
- Previously unreported changes in the family or household and/or false statements given;
- Previously unreported employment/earnings;
- No means of support for the three months prior to application;
- Moved to Rhode Island in the past three months (except for refugees);
- Assets appear greater than those reported; or
- Suspicion that child(ren) does not live with applicant parent.

According to workers, about half of FIP applicants are referred to the FRED unit. The FRED unit has been in operation since the implementation of welfare reform and includes 4 investigators and 1 supervisor. During 2001, the workers in this unit conducted home visits to the households of approximately 2,100 applicants. Of these applicants, 1 in 5 were denied benefits based on information gathered during the home visit.

FRED workers make contact on their first visit to applicants' residences about 75 percent of the time. Applicants who are not home at the time of the FRED workers' visit are left a business card and a note asking them to call the worker to schedule a visit. FRED workers notify eligibility technicians if they are unable to contact applicants after 3 visits to the home. Generally speaking, contact is made with applicants before this three-visit threshold is reached. Most of the time, the only referred applicants for whom a FRED visit never occurs are those that voluntarily withdraw their applications for FIP before a home visit occurs. Very few of these applicants submit a subsequent application.

Eligibility technicians also go over the various child support enforcement options available to applicants. This involves informing applicants of their rights regarding a waiver from pursuing child support in cases where the absent parent poses a physical threat. Applicants who agree to comply with child support enforcement sign an AP-35 form. The ultimate decision regarding applicants'

compliance with child support enforcement requirements is made by the child support enforcement agency. Following completion of the AP-35, eligibility technicians go over several other forms. These include the SAV-1 (citizenship status) and the AP-91 (bank account information). After these forms are signed, the intake interview is complete, unless applicants have any additional questions.

Applicants who bring all the required documentation to their intake interview and appear to be eligible for FIP may be approved for cash assistance at the time of the interview. Applicants who do not bring all of the necessary documentation to their intake interview are given an envelope and told to mail the outstanding documents to the office. During business hours, applicants can also leave forms in a drop box located inside the building. As long as any outstanding documents are received within 30 days of the date of application, a decision on the application will be made. Rhode Island does not require applicants to provide proof of children's immunizations or school attendance; that information is collected directly from children's school districts.

Applicants who do not show up for their scheduled intake interviews are given until 4 P.M. on the same day to call the office to reschedule their appointment. A notice is sent to applicants who neither show up nor call informing them that they missed their interview and did not call their worker. Applicants who respond to this notice and re-schedule their intake interview within thirty days of their initial appointment resume the application process at the intake interview. Applicants who do not respond within thirty days, and still want to apply for FIP, have to start the application process from the beginning. Applicants who do not respond within 30 days are denied FIP benefits and sent a notice informing them of the decision and of their right to appeal. The number of missed intake appointments each month is reportedly relatively low.

Eligibility Determination

Once approved for FIP benefits, clients must return to the office within 45 days for an assessment of employability, educational level, and family needs. Social workers develop Individual Development Plans based on the information provided at the assessment. Individual Development Plans consist of a series of educational and employment-related goals that FIP clients must attempt to meet during the first 24 months of FIP participation. In most cases, clients are referred to outside vendors who specialize in serving different needs.³

Exhibit 10.2 below is a representation of the TANF application process in Providence, with an emphasis on information exchanged and applicant decision points.

³ Generally speaking, clients are referred to vendors for services in one or more of the following areas: training, education, and/or employment placement and retention.

Exhibit 10.2

Application Process: Providence, RI

<p>Information Provided by Client:</p>	<p>Reception</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purpose of visit—what program(s) individuals want to apply for • Whether or not they have children 	<p>Screening Interview</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic information regarding: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demographic information • Family and household composition • Public assistance history • Reason for applying for FIP • Income, assets, resources 	<p>Intake Interview</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Detailed information regarding: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family and household composition • Current income • Assets • Documentation required to process FIP application (birth certificates, bank statements, pay stubs, etc.) 	<p>Pending Application Requirements</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applicants provide any outstanding documentation or verifications to the office
<p>Information Provided by Agency:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DHS-1 form is given to all individuals who wish to apply for FIP 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Likely eligibility • Conditions for receiving benefits • Details of the FIP program • Referral to the Adolescent Self Sufficiency Collaborative, as appropriate • DHS-2 form is given to applicants and social workers go over this form with applicants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applicants are given a list of the information they must provide before a decision can be made on their case • Child support enforcement options available to applicants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Office has 30 days from date of intake interview to make a decision on applications
<p>Applicant Decisions:</p>	<p>Whether to fill out the DHS-1 form</p>	<p>Whether to sign DHS-1 form and come to intake interview</p>	<p>Whether to proceed with application</p>	<p>Whether or not to provide outstanding verifications and/or documentation</p>
<p>Application Results:</p>	<p>Applicants do not begin process</p> <p>Applicant s fill out DHS-1 and screening interviews are scheduled</p>	<p>Applicants do not continue a application process</p> <p>Applicants proceed with application; return to office within 5 days for intake interview</p>	<p>Applicants do not continue application process</p> <p>Applicants proceed with application process; have 30 days to provide office with complete information</p>	<p>FIP benefits denied due to incomplete application</p> <p>FIP benefits granted or denied due to circumstantial ineligibility; other benefits denied or granted</p>

Historical Perspective

The implementation of TANF in Rhode Island brought about few changes in overall cash assistance policy or in application policies or procedures. Although the FIP program introduced time limits and mandatory work requirements for all non-exempt participants, it is not otherwise a dramatic departure from the policies that were in place under AFDC. Rhode Island already had a work requirement prior to TANF, the Pathway to Independence program. This program served only 20 percent of the welfare caseload, while the current system mandates that all non-exempt recipients must meet specified work requirements.

Sanctioning policies in Rhode Island have also changed somewhat under TANF. For example, before reform, noncompliant mandatory Pathway program participants were removed from their case's benefit until they complied. Under FIP, a graduated sanctioning schedule has been put into effect under which recipients lose their portion of the grant plus an additional 10 to 40 percent depending on the number of months of noncompliance. Rhode Island never terminates the child portion of the grant, unlike some other States that use full family sanctions if adults do not comply with TANF policies.

One policy change under the Family Independence Act was the elimination of the AFDC-UP employment experience requirement, which opened TANF to all financially eligible two-parent families. Under FIP, all two-parent families who meet the income and resource eligibility requirements are qualified to receive benefits.

During our site visit to Providence, we discussed the transition from AFDC to TANF with various workers. Most workers interviewed reported that little about the application process had changed as a result of welfare reform. For example, unlike some States, applicants in Rhode Island are not required to participate in an applicant job search or job-readiness assessment. Issues related to employment are addressed only after applicants have been approved for FIP benefits. Workers do not believe that FIP policies, such as time limits and work requirements, deter individuals from completing the application process.

Applicant Decision Points

There are several points in the FIP application process at which prospective applicants may decide to end the application process or may be informed that they will not qualify for benefits. The first point at which applicants may decide to withdraw from the application process is at the end of the screening interview, once they have been told about their likely eligibility for FIP benefits. Reportedly, it is rare for applicants to break off the process after the screening interview.

Some applicants may not return to the office for their intake interview. Once the intake interview is completed, applicants may be referred to the front-end detection (FRED) unit. All applicants who are referred to this unit must complete a home visit by a fraud investigator. Referred applicants who do not complete this process are denied FIP benefits.

After completing the screening and intake interviews, applicants must agree to comply with child support enforcement and provide any outstanding verification information. Once these steps are completed, eligibility technicians have all the information they need to make eligibility decisions. In our review of a sample of prospective applicants and applicants in Providence, we observed how

many of a randomly chosen sample of individuals appearing at the office to apply for FIP took each of the following steps:

- Complete and sign DHS-1 form
- Attend Screening Interview
- Complete DHS-2 form (asks applicant for detailed information)
- Attend Intake Interview
- Referral made to FRED unit, if necessary
- Agree to comply with child support enforcement by completing AP-35 form
- Complete necessary verifications

The next sections of this chapter review and discuss the results of follow-up interviews and case record reviews of a sample of FIP applicants.

TANF Application Decisions, Experiences, and Outcomes

This section presents findings on the application decisions, experiences, and outcomes of a sample of individuals appearing at the Providence Regional Family Center (PRFC) of the Rhode Island Department of Human Services (DHS). The findings are based on the follow-up interviews and case record reviews.

Applicants and Applicant Decisions

The study collected information on 423 individuals with an interest in TANF that appeared at the PRFC from 1/14/02 – 3/15/02. A random, stratified sample of these individuals was surveyed by telephone from 3 to 9 months after entering the study sample by appearing at the welfare office and signing a contact sheet. Exhibit 10.3 summarizes their TANF application decisions and results.

Exhibit 10.3

TANF Application Decisions and Results: Providence, RI^a

Certified TANF Applicants (%)	61.3
Uncertified TANF Applicants (%)	17.7
Nonapplicants (%)	21.1

Source: Case Record Reviews

^a Percentages weighted by stratum size

Exhibit 10.4 displays selected socio-economic and demographic characteristics of the individuals and families with an interest in TANF that appeared at the PRFC office. The exhibit presents weighted means and frequencies for the total research sample, as well as statistics for each study stratum.

Exhibit 10.4**Selected Characteristics of Prospective TANF Applicants: Providence, RI**

Individual, Family, or Household (HH) Characteristic	Total Research Sample^a (n = 201)	Certified for TANF (n = 111)	Uncertified for TANF (n = 90)
Age of prospective applicant (mean years)	28.0	27.6	28.7
Ethnicity of prospective applicant (%):			
Hispanic	55	59	49
Non-Hispanic:			
White	13	10	18
African-American	12	15	9
Asian, Pacific Islander, or Native American	8	6	10
Multi-ethnic/Other	12	10	14
Persons in HH (mean)	3.8	3.6	4.0
Children in family (mean)	1.4	1.4	1.4
Families living with other adults in HH (%)	54	48	64**
Prospective applicant's marital status (%)			
Married	9	4	18***
Separated	14	14	14
Divorced/Widowed	8	9	7
Never married	70	74	61*
Family's living situation (%)			
Own house	6	4	9
Rent	50	50	52
Live with others and do not pay rent	19	22	14
Live with others and pay rent	24	24	22
Other (Includes shelter)	1	1	2
Public housing or Section 8 (%)	17	21	12*
Educational attainment of prospective applicant (%)			
Less than HS	38	42	31
HS or GED only	42	34	51**
Trade school or license	3	3	3
Trade school or license and HS or GED	11	13	8
College degree	7	8	6
HH with employed member (%)	15	11	21**
Family receives child support income (%)	12	12	12
Monthly income available to family (mean) ^b	\$407	\$337	\$539***

Source: Follow-up Survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

^a Percentages weighted by stratum size.^b "Income" includes earned and unearned income available to the family to meet monthly expenses.

As Exhibit 10.4 shows, the average family in the study sample has less than 2 children, although about half of the households include other (non-caretaker) adults, bringing the average household size up to about 4 persons; uncertified families are more likely to include non-caretaker adults. About 90 percent of the families overall are headed by a single parent, although uncertified families are more likely than certified families to include married couples.

There are some notable differences between the certified and the uncertified groups. Most notable, uncertified families are more likely to include an employed adult, and reported having much higher monthly incomes than certified families at the time of initial contact with the PRFC office.

The follow-up survey included questions about the motivation individuals had in coming to the welfare office to ask about, or apply for, cash benefits. The results for Providence are presented in Exhibit 10.5, below. The prevalent major reason for seeking assistance reported by individuals at the PRFC office is a loss of income (40 percent), with unemployment being the most common event behind that loss. There are no statistically significant differences between the certified and uncertified groups in the distribution of reported major reasons for seeking assistance.

Exhibit 10.5

Major Reason for Seeking Assistance: Providence, RI

Major reason (%)	All ^f (n = 201)	Certified (n = 111)	Uncertified (n = 90)
Prospective applicant or other adult in household lost a job	30	32	29
Household lost income ^a	10	10	9
It became too hard to make ends meet ^b	15	16	13
Household composition changed ^c	14	14	13
Prospective applicant or child became ill or pregnant ^d	20	17	24
Family moved	6	6	4
Other ^e	6	5	7

Source: Follow-up Survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

^a “Household lost income” includes the following responses: prospective applicant or other adult in household started earning less money from a job; prospective applicant lost some other type of income; financial help from a friend or relative stopped; and, no income/lost income.

^b “It became too hard to make ends meet” includes the following responses: rent, mortgage, or utilities went up; it was getting harder and harder to make ends meet; and, needed to supplement income/needed income to support kids.

^c “Household composition changed” includes the following responses: number of people in household increased; separation from spouse/partner; and, household member died.

^d “Prospective applicant or child became ill or pregnant” includes the following responses: prospective applicant became sick or disabled; child became sick or disabled; and, pregnancy.

^e “Other” includes the following responses: encouraged by office to apply for cash assistance when applying for other benefits; wanted Medicaid or Food Stamp benefits; seeking assistance – related to transportation or unspecified; homeless; in school/student; and, other.

^f Percentages weighted by stratum size

Among the research sample in Providence, a relatively high 21 percent of those families with children appearing at the welfare office for information decided not to apply for assistance. When asked the main reason why they decided not to apply, the largest percentage of those specifying a reason answered that they had too much income.

Exhibit 10.6

Main Reason for Deciding Not to Apply: Providence, RI

Main Reason (%)	Percentage of Nonapplicants (n = 49)
Too much income	40
Found a job	0
Decided not to complete the application process	2
No dependent children	10
Other	48

Source: Follow-up survey

Application Experiences

In an effort to understand the level of effort required to complete the TANF application at the PRFC, as well to observe how far uncertified applicants progressed through the application process, the study used the case record reviews to measure the number of specific requirements for each TANF applicant. Exhibit 10.7 presents findings on the proportion of applicants facing specific behavioral and informational requirements described earlier in this chapter, as well as the proportion fulfilling each requirement. The number before the backslash (/) indicates the percentage of applicants required to complete a specific application requirement. The number after the backslash indicates the percentage of those required who completed the specific requirement. For example, 99 percent of the certified group was required to sign the child support enforcement agreement, and 99 percent did so. Similarly, while 98 percent of the uncertified group was required to do so, only 62 percent of those required signed the form.

As the exhibit shows, the proportion of uncertified individuals failing to complete various requirements increases as they get further into the process. Thus while 98 percent of the uncertified applicants attended the screening interview, only 60 percent attended the eligibility interview and only 30 percent provided all necessary verifications.

Exhibit 10.8 presents the way in which individuals proceed through the TANF application process in a more dynamic way. The exhibit presents the probability that any research sample member appearing at the welfare office will complete a sequenced step in the application process (first line across), as well as the conditional probability that once reaching a given step, an individual will move on to the next steps or outcome in the process.

Exhibit 10.7**TANF Application Requirements—Percentage Required/Percentage Completed:
Providence, RI^a**

Application Requirement (%)	All Applicants ^a (n = 152)	Certified (n = 111)	Uncertified (n = 41)
Sign and submit DHS-1	100/100	100/100	100/100
Attend screening interview	100/99	100/100	100/98
Complete DHS-2	100/92	100/100	100/63***
Attend eligibility interview	100/92	100/100	100/60***
Sign form for child support enforcement	99/91	99/99	98/62***
Sign form for child support enforcement	99/91	99/99	98/62***
Referral to FRED unit	18/86	18/95	17/40***
Provide all verifications	100/86	100/100	100/30**

Source: Case record review

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

^a Percentages weighted by stratum size; only includes applicants

Exhibit 10.8**Probability of Advancing Through Steps in the Application Process: Providence, RI^a**

Step in Process	Step in Process (n = 200)				
	Submit DHS-1	Screening Interview	Complete DHS-2	Eligibility Interview	Certified for TANF
Appear at office	.79	.79	.73	.73	.62
Submit DHS-1		.99	.92	.92	.79
Screening interview			.92	.92	.79
Complete DHS-2				1.00	.86
Eligibility interview					.86

Source: Case record review

^a Percentages weighted by stratum size.

Reading the table in Exhibit 10.8 from left to right indicates the probability that an individual who has reached the step in the left hand column will complete each of the remaining steps and become certified.⁴ For example, the table shows that those that complete the screening interview have a 92

⁴ Note that individuals are considered to have completed a step in the process if they fulfilled the specific step's requirements or if they were exempt from those requirements. Note also that individuals with missing data for any of the application steps are not included in the analysis.

percent chance of completing the eligibility interview and a 79 percent chance of becoming certified for TANF. Reading the table down each column indicates the probability that an individual who completes the step in a row will also complete the step in the column. For example, 100 percent of the individuals who complete the DHS-2 also attend an eligibility interview. The Exhibit indicates that once an individual appears at the PRFC the biggest drop-off actually occurs *before* an application (DHS-1) is submitted.

In the follow-up survey, respondents were asked whether or not they thought they were eligible for TANF at the time they appeared at the PRFC office. Results are presented in Exhibit 10.9. Overall, about two-thirds of the applicants reported that they believed themselves to be eligible for TANF when they went to the office, with no differences between the groups.

Exhibit 10.9

Pre-Application Ideas About Eligibility: Providence, RI

Applicant's Ideas About Likely Eligibility (%)	Total^a (n = 201)	Certified (n = 111)	Uncertified (n = 90)
Believed to be eligible	63	60	70
Believed to be ineligible	19	19	18
Was not sure	18	21	12

Source: Follow-up Survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

^a Percentages weighted by stratum size.

The follow-up survey sought to measure applicants' satisfaction with the application process. In particular, two survey questions focused on applicant opinions about the adequacy of information and office assistance in negotiating the application process. One question asked respondents how well they understood the application process and its requirements and another asked their opinions about the adequacy of office staff assistance in negotiating the application process. Results are presented in Exhibit 10.10.

As the exhibit shows, almost two-thirds of the respondents reported that they "really understood" the process, and less than one-fifth reported that they had "no idea at all," with no difference between certified and uncertified individuals. More than three-quarters of the respondents reported that they received all or most of the help they needed, with a relatively small 10 percent of the uncertified group reporting that they received none of the help needed.

Exhibit 10.10**Applicant Opinions About the Application Process and Staff Assistance: Providence, RI**

Opinions About Application Process and Office Staff	Total^a (n = 201)	Certified (n = 111)	Uncertified (n = 90)
How well did applicant understand application process (%):			
Really understood	63	63	64
Somewhat unsure	19	19	18
No idea at all	18	18	18
How much of the help you needed was provided by office staff (%):			
All	54	57	46
Most	25	25	25
Only some	18	18	19
None	4	0	10***

Source: Follow-up survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

^a Percentages weighted by stratum size.

Application Outcomes

Observing TANF application outcomes, both at the time of application and at the time of the follow-up interview several months later, may provide insights into whether the application process may be deterring otherwise eligible individuals from applying or completing an application for TANF benefits. Before investigating this issue, we present findings about the benefit programs and benefits that TANF applicants in our study were able to access. The results regarding benefits are presented in Exhibit 10.11. The exhibit illustrates the important finding that even though none of the uncertified sample was eligible for TANF benefits, a small number were newly certified for food stamps and Medicaid. However, the Exhibit shows that the uncertified group was far less likely than the certified group to gain access to non-TANF benefits.

Exhibit 10.12 presents findings about why uncertified cases were denied for TANF cash assistance. These results are based on the case record review and represent the “official” administrative reason for denial. As the exhibit shows, about 27 percent were denied for circumstances (including those failing to verify residency) and about 70 percent withdrew from the process, failed to keep an appointment, or failed to provide all required documentation.

Exhibit 10.11**Application Outcomes: Benefits, Providence, RI**

Benefit Outcome	Total^a (n = 201)	Certified (n = 111)	Uncertified (n = 90)
Mean monthly TANF benefit	N/A	\$403	N/A
Newly certified for food stamps (%)	33	50	3***
Mean monthly food stamp benefit (for newly certified)	\$199	\$200	\$171***
Newly certified for Medicaid (%)	15	23	4***

Source: Case record review

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

^a Percentages weighted by stratum size

Exhibit 10.12**Reasons for Denial of Uncertified Cases: Providence, RI**

Reason for Denial (%)	Percentage of Uncertified Applicants (n = 41)
Denied for circumstances: too much income	17
Denied for circumstances: too many assets	5
Unable to verify residency	5
Failure to keep scheduled appointments	37
Failure to provide verifications or required documentation	27
Voluntary withdrawal	5
Other reason	5

Source: Case record review

When interpreting these results, it is important to note first that caseworkers are not always accurate in selecting a reason for denial, but only that some reason must be selected in order to complete casework on the application. Second, some applicants who failed to complete the application process may have done so because of a belief that they would be found ineligible on other grounds. The follow-up survey included an item designed to measure the extent to which those who failed to complete the application believed that they would be found ineligible for circumstances. Responses from the survey are summarized in Exhibit 10.13

When combined with the results from the case record review presented in Exhibit 10.12, the findings in Exhibit 10.13 indicate that some of the applicants who failed to complete the process did so

because they thought they would not be found eligible (“too much income,” “too many assets”). On the other hand, others simply listed as their main reason for failing to complete the process the particular behavioral or informational requirement with which they did not comply.

Exhibit 10.13

Reported Main Reason for Failure to Complete Application: Providence, RI

Main Reason (%)	Percentage of Uncertified Applicants Who Failed to Complete Application ^a (n = 28)
Too much income	16
Found a job	8
Too many assets	0
No dependent children	4
Missed interview	16
Did not provide verifications	24
Did not cooperate with child support enforcement	0
Other	32

Source: Follow-up survey

^a Includes answer to survey question about reasons for being denied *only* for applicants who were *not* denied assistance due to circumstances.

In assessing the degree to which otherwise needy families may have been informally diverted from filing or completing the application, the follow-up survey asked respondents about their current situations and how things have changed since appearing at the Providence Regional Family Center office (approximately 3 to 9 months later, depending on the time of appearance at the office and the date of the telephone interview). Results are presented in Exhibit 10.14.

Overall, compared to certified families, uncertified families are better off financially and more likely to be employed. These same differences were observed at the time individuals appeared at the PRFC office (see Exhibit 10.4, above) indicating that, on average, the application process seems to have distinguished between better-off and worse-off low-income families. In keeping with this general pattern, uncertified families were far less likely than certified families to be receiving TANF, food stamp, or Medicaid insurance benefits at follow-up.

As in the case of most of the other sites, by the time of the follow-up interview, both groups of respondents in Providence had experienced improvements in average income since appearing at the welfare office. This is not surprising, given that so many of the respondents reported some loss of income as the major reason for appearing at the welfare office in the first place. Although the reported increases in average monthly incomes are the same statistically for both groups, uncertified families were less likely than certified families to report that their situation had improved. When family incomes reported at follow-up are compared to incomes reported at the time families first appeared at the welfare office (as opposed to asking respondents directly whether or not they are better off now),

certified families were actually more likely than uncertified families to have experienced an increase in monthly income of more than \$100, and less likely to have experienced a change less than \$100.

Exhibit 10.14

Family Status at Follow-up and Changes Since Applying for TANF: Providence, RI

Current Status or Change	All (n = 201) ^a	Certified (n = 111)	Uncertified (n = 90)
Participation in assistance programs (%)			
Currently receives TANF benefits	59	83	16***
Currently receives food stamps	63	75	41***
Currently receives Medicaid	84	92	70***
Currently receives WIC	55	6	46**
Child currently receives subsidized school meals (Among households with school-age children)	81 (n = 80)	87 (n = 47)	70 (n=33)
Employment status and changes			
Currently employed (%)	24	14	43***
Mean hours worked (employed only)	31	28	32
Left employment since applying (%)	5	5	6
Found employment since applying (%)	15	7	28***
Employed at both time points (%)	10	6	16**
Employed at neither time point (%)	71	82	51***
Change reported in (%):			
Household size	26	23	30
Marital status	4	2	9**
Housing situation	22	24	19
Current income and changes in income ^b			
Current mean monthly income available to family	\$667	\$558	\$878***
Change in monthly income since applying	260	226	328
Change in overall financial situation since applying (%)			
Better now	48	54	37**
Worse now	14	10	22*
Same	38	36	41

Source: Follow-up survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

^a Percentages weighted by stratum size.

^b "Income" includes all earned and unearned income available to the family to meet monthly expenses.

Exhibit 10.15**Changes in Family Financial Status Based on Reported Income at Application and at Follow-up: Providence, RI**

Change in Financial Status (%)	Certified (n = 111)	Uncertified (n = 90)
Better off: reported monthly income increased by more than \$100	66	45***
Worse off: reported monthly income decreased by more than \$100	16	8
The same: no change of more than \$100 in monthly income	18	47***

Source: Follow-up survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

In a final analysis designed to indicate the potential for otherwise needy families to be diverted from applying for, or completing the application for TANF, we compare the follow-up monthly incomes of certified clients, non-applicants, and applicants who did not complete the process. Because some of the groups are so small and may vary greatly by family size, we present per capita monthly incomes. We also compare the proportion of families in each group with an employed member. Results for individuals who responded to these questions in the follow-up survey are shown in Exhibit 10.16.

As the exhibit shows, in Providence, non-applicants have statistically higher incomes than certified applicants at follow-up, and applicant non-completers have incomes statistically equivalent to those of certified families. If, on average, the appropriate families are deciding not to apply, or deciding not to complete the TANF application, one would expect their incomes to be the same as, or higher than, the incomes of certified applicants. This is in fact the case in Providence. Moreover, both applicant non-completers and non-applicants are more likely to be employed at follow-up than certified applicants. Although these results are not conclusive proof that inappropriate informal diversion does not happen in Providence, they are strong evidence that, on average, otherwise needy families are not being diverted from TANF benefits.

Exhibit 10.16**Reported Family Per Capita Monthly Income at Follow-Up: Providence, RI**

	Certified Applicants (n = 111)	Applicant Non- Completers (n = 28)	Non-Applicants (n = 49)
Per capita monthly income	\$238	\$281	\$383***
Percent employed at follow-up	14%	39%***	43%***

Source: Follow-up survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

Concluding Observations

This concluding section addresses the three major research questions for the case studies in the context of the TANF application process in Providence, Rhode Island. Those questions include:

How does the TANF intake and application process operate in selected local TANF Program offices and how has it changed since the end of the AFDC Program?

In Rhode Island, the implementation of TANF brought about few changes in the application process as it had operated under AFDC. No new behavioral requirements were imposed on applicants, and few major policies for ongoing cash assistance were changed either. The application process is relatively streamlined, with most applicants requiring two appearances at the PRFC office to complete the application process.

What is the potential for individuals to be formally or informally diverted from filing or completing TANF applications in selected TANF offices?

Unlike some of the other study sites, in which prospective applicants often sign and submit an application “facesheet” before much exchange of information, the process in Providence includes a screening interview *before* the application is formally filed. This presents an opportunity for informal diversion prior to filing the application. As discussed above, a relatively large proportion of prospective applicants in fact did not file an application (21 percent of those appearing at the PRFC office). After filing an application, individuals may drop out of the process between the initial visit and the eligibility interview or may fail to provide all necessary verifications. Finally, some applicants referred to a FRED unit for a fraud investigation may fail to cooperate or may be found ineligible by the FRED unit investigators.

What is the evidence concerning the possible contribution of changes in the application process to changes in individuals’ decisions to apply and to complete the application process?

Among individuals with children seeking information about assistance appearing at the Providence Regional Family Center, a relatively low 79 percent filed applications for TANF and 21 percent did not; 61 percent of the research sample families were certified for TANF, and 18 percent applied but were not certified. Of the uncertified applicants, about 70 percent did not complete the application process. Information about the contribution of changes in the application process to changes in decisions to file and complete an application come from three main sources: the informed opinion of caseworkers; applicant reports about their motivation and expectations in the application decision and process; and applicant behavior as reflected in the case record. We consider the evidence from each source below.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, staff interviewed for the study felt that the reasons individuals may have for deciding not to apply, or not to complete the application, are not directly related to either application or overall policy changes under TANF in Rhode Island. Many of the reasons mentioned by staff not to apply or to complete the application are reasons that would have been relevant under AFDC, as well.

Combining results from the follow-up survey with results from the case record reviews provides some statistical evidence about the potential for informal diversion at the PRFC office. Rhode Island does not have a formal diversionary assistance program. For example, a relatively large 21 percent of those appearing at the office to inquire about assistance decided not to apply. Of these, about half reported having too much income or no qualifying dependent children. An additional 12 percent applied but did not complete the application process.

When the post-application incomes of nonapplicants and applicant non-completers are compared with the incomes of certified families in Providence, the study found noncompleters to be as well off as certified applicants and non-applicants to have higher incomes than certified families. Moreover, non-applicants and applicant non-completers were far more likely than certified applicants to be employed at the time of the follow-up interview. These findings suggest that in Providence, on average, otherwise needy or TANF-eligible families are not necessarily being deterred from applying for, or completing an application for, TANF benefits.

Chapter Eleven: The TANF Application Process and Results in Cook County, Illinois

Overview and Context

The Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) administers Illinois' TANF Program. All local offices follow the same policies, but they have some discretion for certain procedural decisions. The program includes provisions that specifically promote employment and some limited educational activities. The lifetime limit for cash assistance in Illinois is 60 months, however, the months in which participants work for at least 30 hours per week do not count against their lifetime limit.¹ Similarly, the months in which a single parent attends post-secondary education and obtains a grade point average of at least 2.5 do not count against the clock. Additionally, Illinois does not count against the 60-month limit any month in which the adult cares for a severely disabled child approved for a Home and Community-Based Care waiver, cares for a child under 18 or spouse who requires care due to a documented medical condition, participates in the Employment Retention and Advancement Project, or is eligible for a domestic violence exclusion.

TANF participants in Illinois must begin work activities immediately upon receiving benefits. Individuals who have children younger than one or who are over 60 years of age are exempt from the work requirement, although this time on assistance still counts towards their lifetime limit. Allowable work activities in Illinois include unsubsidized employment, on-the-job training, up to 24 months of vocational education, education and job skills training directly related to employment, and mental health or substance abuse treatment. Additionally, recipients may participate in English as a Second Language classes for up to 24 months, post-secondary education for up to 36 months, or basic education for up to 24 months.

The Illinois TANF Program also includes an earnings disregard and employment support provision, called Work Pays. Through Work Pays, participants' assistance grants are reduced by only \$1 for every \$3 earned. Participants continue to receive medical coverage, child care subsidies, and Food Stamps. All working families pay part of their child care, based on their income and the number of children in the family. There is a \$50 pass-through of child support payments: each month that a noncustodial parent pays at least \$50 in child support, the custodial parent receives \$50 that will not count against their TANF grant.

¹ Currently, single-parent families must work 30 hours per week and two-parent families must work 35 hours per week in order to have the time limit suspended.

Exhibit 11.1

Overview of Illinois TANF Provisions^a

Time Limit	Lifetime limit of 60 months
Time Limit Exemptions	Illinois does not count against the 60-month limit any months in which the adult meets certain requirements ^b
Time Limit Exceptions	Some exceptions are allowed under specific conditions ^c
Time Limit Extensions	When a family no longer qualifies for an exception, TANF is extended for three additional months to allow the family to become self-supporting
Family Cap Provision	No additional cash benefits for any children born after parents have received assistance for at least 10 months, unless an exception applies ^d
Work Requirements	Participants are required to engage in work activities as soon as possible but no later than 24 months after first receiving assistance
Work Activities	Single-parent families must participate in work activities for 30 hours per week and two-parent families for 35 hours each week
Work Activity Exemptions and Deferrals	Exempt if older than 60 years or age of youngest child is less than one year
Earned Income Disregard	Participants' grants are reduced by \$1 for every \$3 earned

^a Policies prevailing at the time a sample was drawn for the project (11/01–7/02).

^b Illinois does not count against the 60-month limit any months in which the adult (1) works 30 hours per week (35 hours for a two-parent family); (2) is in an approved degree program with at least a 2.5 grade point average (a client may stop the clock under this policy for a lifetime maximum of 36 months); (3) cares for a severely disabled child approved for a Home and Community-Based Care waiver; (4) provides full-time care for a child or spouse who requires care due to a documented medical condition; (5) participates in the Employment Retention and Advancement program; or (6) is eligible for a domestic violence exclusion.

^c Adults who have used their 60 months of assistance may continue to receive assistance for the following reasons: a pending SSI application that is likely to be approved; a documented medical condition that prevents full-time work; an approved education program to be completed in six months; an intensive program that precludes full-time work; caring for a severely disabled child with Home and Community-Based Care waiver; or caring for a disabled child or spouse with a documented medical condition.

^d The child is covered by Medicaid and is considered a TANF cash client in every way except that the family's payment level is not increased. Family cap provisions do not apply to a child conceived as a result of incest or rape, a child included in a TANF unit when the caretaker relative is not the child's parent and the parent is not in the home, or a child born to a minor included in the TANF unit and the minor is a first-time parent.

TANF Application Process

Two local TANF offices in Chicago—Englewood and Oakland—were selected as study sites.² Interestingly, the two neighboring offices illustrate well the discretion allowed local offices in designing some aspects of the application process. The Chicago offices were selected as an example of programs that have important employment-related requirements for the application process.

² Because of the number of applicants served and the approval rate in each of Chicago's local offices, two offices were needed to ensure that the sample of applicants, combined over both offices, was large enough to meet the statistical requirements needed for the applicant interview and case record review process within the timeframe planned for the study.

Summary of Process

Although the TANF application process in Illinois is generally standardized, local offices retain some discretion. For example, some local offices have instituted a mandatory orientation session for all TANF applicants. In the Englewood office, individuals cannot attend their intake interviews or officially register as applicants until they have attended this orientation session. Other local offices, including the Oakland office, do not hold orientation sessions and instead direct TANF applicants through a screening process where they immediately receive an overview of the application process and TANF requirements and officially register as an applicant.

Beyond the initial steps—from orientation to screening—the application process is relatively similar in the two study offices. For example, the information provided and collected by the agency during the intake interview is fairly standard, and the application requirements—including cooperation with child support, completion of a family assessment, development of a responsibility and service plan, and fulfillment of job search requirements—are the same across offices.

Once applicants have completed the intake interview and are filed as applicants, and unless otherwise exempt, they must attend weekly Job Club sessions throughout the application process and must submit the names of 10 contacted employers per week.³ Failure to attend Job Club or to submit 10 employer contacts per week may result in the denial of the TANF application, in which case applicants have to start the process over again.

Applicants who provide all necessary verification information and who comply with Job Club requirements have their applications processed in no less than 30 days, but no longer than 45 days.

Reception

The main lobbies of both Chicago offices are large spaces with rows of seating to accommodate waiting customers. Brochures and posters related to programs offered through the Illinois Department of Human Services are placed throughout the room. The reception desk is at the far end of the room, and participants form a line while waiting for assistance. In Englewood, when potential applicants enter the building, a customer service representative may greet them, or they may go immediately to the desk on their own. At the reception desk in both offices, reception staff enter individuals' names and addresses onto a computerized form, which does not require a signature. Applicants then receive an application packet.

Although individuals are referred to as applicants at this point, in Englewood they are not formally registered as applicants until they meet with their eligibility worker, which could happen that day or sometime over the next week.⁴ In the Oakland office, however, individuals are referred directly to a

³ Offices use different names for the weekly employment-related sessions. For instance, one office refers to this requirement as Focus Group, since although some individuals may be exempt from work requirements, they are still encouraged to participate in the focus group which, for exempt individuals, concentrates on future employment preparedness, parenting, family skills or other relevant issues. For simplicity, we refer to the regularly scheduled, weekly application job search appointments as Job Club throughout this case study.

⁴ Since the site visits were conducted for this study, this policy has changed. All applicants in Englewood are now registered and complete an intake interview their first day in the office.

screeener who conducts an informational screening and registers the individual as an applicant. The date of registration is the official date of application, and with a few exceptions the applicant cannot receive benefits for at least 30 days from the point of registration; workers have an additional 15 days to process the case.

Orientation

Local offices have discretion in determining whether or not to hold orientation sessions for TANF applicants. Of the two offices that were visited for this study, Englewood conducts mandatory orientation sessions for all TANF applicants prior to the intake interview. Englewood orientation sessions are held daily at 8:30 in the morning. Individuals who begin the application process before 8:30 are invited to attend that morning's TANF orientation session; individuals who begin the process after the orientation is in session or is completed are asked to return for orientation the next day.

The orientation is led by a Job Club caseworker. Before describing program rules and regulations, the caseworker asks who is currently employed, and if so, how much they earn. The caseworker uses this as a general assessment of whether or not individuals will be eligible for the TANF Program. If it does not seem like they will be eligible for TANF on the basis of their incomes, the caseworker explains that they still may be eligible for Medicaid and food stamps, and encourages them to apply for those programs. This rough calculation of eligibility may serve as a useful gauge for potential applicants and prevent them from spending unnecessary time in the application process.⁵ However, because this process occurs prior to the intake interview and is based on an approximation of earnings, eligible applicants may decide to end the process before applying for assistance and prior to any interaction with an eligibility worker.

During the orientation, the major TANF requirements and regulations, including the applicant job search requirement, program work requirement, TANF time limit, and family cap provision, among others, are explained to potential applicants. The case worker also explains that if applicants fail to find jobs, they are required to participate in community service activities for six hours a day, five days a week, in order to receive their grants. Applicants are encouraged to ask questions about the requirements and how they may relate to their personal circumstances.

After explaining the program provisions, the Job Club caseworker leaves the room to look up each of the potential applicants' records to ensure that they do not have pending or open cases, and to find out if any are also receiving food stamps or Medicaid. Those who have any open or pending case or who are receiving Medicaid must work through their current worker to apply for TANF. At this point, the caseworker assigns potential applicants each to an eligibility worker. Individuals then wait in the reception area for their eligibility worker to call them in for an eligibility meeting. Applicants who cannot stay for a meeting that day can arrange an eligibility meeting at the reception desk for a later date.

⁵ Since the site visit, the office changed this practice. It no longer asks individuals if they are working or about their incomes and does not estimate eligibility based on these figures. Instead, all applicants attend the full orientation session.

Screening

In the Oakland office, which does not hold orientation sessions, information about applicants is entered into the data system at the reception desk, and applicants wait to see a screener, who is also an eligibility worker, that day. The screener reviews the requirements of the pre-eligibility Focus Group, which is the name for the Job Club in this office, provides a brief overview of the work requirements, and indicates what information the applicant will need to bring back for the eligibility interview. In addition, if the applicant is eligible, the screener will issue expedited food stamps and will make any immediate referrals necessary to meet emergency needs. The screener also schedules the applicant's first pre-eligibility Focus Group and eligibility interview. The applicant is officially registered at this screening, and staff have 30-45 days from that day to complete the application. Eligibility interviews are typically scheduled within a week of the screening, depending on applicants' schedules.

Intake Interview

In the Englewood office, which holds orientation sessions, an eligibility worker typically sees applicants who are able to stay for an eligibility interview within approximately half an hour after the end of the orientation session. In the Oakland office, as noted above, eligibility interviews are typically scheduled within a week of applicants' first visit to the office. During the eligibility interview, individuals are formally registered as applicants if they have not been registered prior to this point.⁶ Additionally, the eligibility worker and applicant review the application packet and verify necessary information. If there is any missing information, eligibility workers will issue a form that lists the missing information and notify applicants that they have 10 days in which to provide the information. Applicants can either bring the information directly to their eligibility worker or drop it off at the reception desk.

During the eligibility interview the eligibility worker and applicant also complete a family assessment. The family assessment collects a variety of information on the family, including, for example: employment, education, and training; family health; and a treatment indicators checklist. In response to the family assessment or other discussions during the eligibility interview, the eligibility worker may issue referrals to various agencies to address any employment barriers identified during the intake process.

Most applicants must also complete a Responsibility and Services Plan (RSP) during the initial interview. The RSP must be completed and signed in order to process the case. The RSP identifies applicants' responsibilities concerning work-related activities, cooperation with child support enforcement, and parenting education classes, if recommended. Additionally, the RSP highlights responsibilities related to goals and activities that address barriers to work, and secondary school completion for teenage parents. After the initial meeting, the RSP is passed on to the Job Club caseworker who manages the RSP and the case for the duration of the application process.

There are a number of other requirements or forms applicants have to complete during the initial interview, including a Form 1260A on which applicants agree to comply with child support unless they have reason for a good cause exemption, and a Form 2540 on which applicants verify that the children in their case live with them. Based on the information provided in the 2540, the office can complete a school match, which allows the eligibility worker to verify that the children and adult

⁶ Individuals in the Oakland office are registered during the screening process, prior to the intake interview.

applicants share the same address, and that the children have been regularly attending school over the preceding quarter. After this, the eligibility interview is complete, and applicants are referred to their first Job Club. If they miss the Job Club for that day, they must schedule another Job Club that week; Clubs are held at regularly scheduled times throughout the week.

In some offices in Illinois, the eligibility interview may be the first and last meeting between an eligibility worker and the applicant prior to disposition. As long as applicants provide any remaining documentation/information within 10 days and comply with Job Club participation requirements, there is no reason to see their eligibility worker on an on-going basis. In other offices, however, applicants must meet with their eligibility worker weekly after attending each week's Job Club. This helps eligibility workers remain informed of applicants' progress and enables eligibility workers to direct applicants to any employment leads they may have. This system helps ensure that both the Job Club caseworker and eligibility worker work as a team to promote employment among applicants.

Job Club

Job Club is held at regularly scheduled times throughout the week. Applicants are scheduled for a specific Job Club each week--there is no walk-in service. Applicants unable to make the scheduled Job Club must call the office by the day of their scheduled Club. Failure to do so results in denial of their TANF application, although they may remain eligible for Food Stamps and Medicaid. Applicants are required to investigate 10 job leads per week during the application period, which lasts for 30-45 days. They meet four times during the application period, for a minimum of 40 leads.

Some individuals are exempt from Job Club: those who are six or more months pregnant, those who have a disability or are a caregiver for someone with a disability, those participating in a substance abuse program, and those with a child younger than one year. Applicants who are working at least 35 hours per week and those receiving unemployment insurance are also exempt from Job Club. Victims of domestic violence may be exempt if they provide evidence, such as a filed police report, that their lives are endangered. Additionally, all applicants who are participating for at least 12 credits in an education or training program that is expected to last less than two years are exempt. Despite these exemptions, all applicants are still referred to Job Club where the Job Club caseworker makes the official exemption determination.

During their first Job Club session, applicants complete an on-line Skill Match form that matches their interests and experience with available employment positions that have been entered into the database. Job Club participants who find jobs during the application period can receive funds or services needed for their employment through the Front Door program. In the Front Door program, the local office serves as a liaison between the participant and local, faith-based community organizations. For instance, if an applicant gets a job that requires a uniform, the office will refer the applicant to a partner organization who can acquire the needed uniform. Other services may include car repair or babysitting until child care has been coordinated.⁷ The Front Door program is primarily used for individuals who find work during the application period, although there may be some exceptions.

⁷ Unless participants find a job, they are not eligible for child care services during the application period. That is, no child care is provided to assist parents in conducting the application job search.

After their initial Job Club meeting, applicants must attend their weekly session to update the Job Club caseworker on their job search activities, deliver information about their 10 employer contacts for that week, continue to search for available positions, and participate in any employment-related workshops the session may offer, including resume writing and interview skills.

Eligibility Determination

TANF eligibility may not be determined in less than 30 days, but must be processed within 45 days. Applicants seeking immediate support may be surprised at the mandatory waiting period and ultimately elect not to apply. Both approved and denied applicants are notified of the disposition by mail.

SWAP Cases

“SWAP” cases refer to individuals participating in Medicaid who then apply for TANF.⁸ Frequently, these are cases in which an applicant was non-cooperative or failed to complete the TANF application or its program requirements and was therefore denied TANF benefits, but were approved for Medicaid eligibility. They may then re-apply for TANF as a SWAP case. The application requirements for SWAP cases are the same as for other TANF applications, but they are handled by the service coordination unit, rather than by the intake unit. SWAP cases are transferred from the Medicaid worker, who handles the SWAP cases, to a service coordination worker (TANF worker), who handles the eligibility determination process and maintains the case after that point.

Exhibit 11.2 below is a representation of the TANF application process in Cook County, with an emphasis on information exchanged and applicant decision points.

⁸ Individuals participating in TANF who then switch to Medicaid only are also referred to as SWAP cases. SWAP is not an acronym for a program title. It simply refers to cases that are transferred, or swapped. Because it has become part of the agency’s standard lexicon, it is often capitalized.

Exhibit 11.2

Application Process: Cook County, IL

	Reception	Orientation ^a	Intake Interview ^b	Complete Information and Verification	Complete Job Club Requirements	Conduct Job Search
Information Provided by Client	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Purpose of visit 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demographic information Family and household composition Income, assets, resources Prior welfare experience Completes Responsibility and Service Plan (RSP) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Additional/remaining information and verifications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attend weekly Job Club appointments^c Complete 10 job leads each week for a minimum of 40 leads over the application period 	Names and signatures of 10 employers contacted
Information Provided by Agency:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pre-application packet that includes program information and general requirements for application process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Major TANF requirements and regulations, including the applicant job search requirement, program work requirement, TANF time limit, family cap provision, community service activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pending application requirements Likely eligibility Likely benefits Conditions for receiving benefits 			
Applicant Decisions:	Whether to complete pre-application form and schedule an intake interview	Whether to proceed with application	Applicant completes interview	Whether to complete pending application requirements within timeframe; whether to comply with Job Club requirements		
Application Results:	<p>No</p> <p>Applicant does not begin process</p> <p>Yes</p> <p>Application schedules orientation session^d</p>	<p>No</p> <p>Applicant does not continue process, may be referred to other programs or services</p> <p>Yes</p> <p>Continues with process and schedules intake interview</p>	<p>No</p> <p>May be referred to other programs or service providers</p> <p>Yes</p> <p>Proceeds with application; case cannot be processed within 30 days, and caseworkers have an additional 15 days to process (for a total of 45 days); application is entered into administrative system</p>	<p>No</p> <p>TANF denied due to incomplete application, failure to attend or comply with Job Club; other benefits denied or granted</p> <p>Yes</p> <p>TANF benefits denied due to circumstantial ineligibility; other benefits denied or granted and/or TANF benefits granted</p>		

^a Note: Not all offices hold orientation sessions. In some offices, applicants schedule their intake interview immediately upon completing the pre-application information.

^b In some offices, applicants are registered during a screening process that takes place before the intake interview. If applicants decide not to proceed after the screening, the application is withdrawn and TANF is denied.

^c Note: In some offices, Job Club is referred to as Focus Group because applicants exempt from the work requirement (i.e. pregnant woman) are still encouraged to attend the weekly appointment to focus on other subjects such as parenting or longer-term employment issues.

^d For offices that do not hold orientation sessions, applicant immediately schedules their intake interview.

Historical Perspective

The application process in Illinois has changed in important ways since the implementation of the TANF Program. Specifically, applicants must complete several employment-related activities in order to process their application, including participating in an employability assessment, attending weekly Job Club sessions, and conducting a job search throughout the application period. Additionally, participants in some local offices now must participate in mandatory orientation sessions before scheduling an eligibility interview; if they miss the orientation session for that day, they must return the following day to participate, which could cause unforeseen scheduling issues that impede their ability to complete the necessary application steps.

Caseworkers interviewed on site agreed that participation in the Job Club and related job search requirement of 10 employer contacts per week have had the biggest impact on individuals' application decisions. Additionally, workers noted that the minimum 30-day wait also affects the decisions of applicants who are seeking primarily immediate assistance. Workers also indicated that individuals were generally aware of the TANF time limits and were often willing to look for a job on their own rather than apply to TANF, especially since they would be forced to look for a job on TANF as well. These stricter program requirements are believed to deter some individuals from applying, and consequently, relying on other means of support.

Applicant Decision Points

Since the implementation of TANF in Illinois, major behavioral requirements have been implemented for applicants for cash assistance. There are several key points in the application process at which application requirements or information exchanged may influence individuals' decisions to apply. In the Englewood office, individuals who must return to participate in the mandatory orientation session may find it difficult to schedule another visit to the office and so may delay or halt their progress in the process. Individuals in Englewood who do attend the orientation session may elect to end the TANF application process at that point after learning about application and program requirements, or being told that their earnings are likely to make them eligible for food stamps and Medicaid only. After individuals in the Oakland office participate in the pre-application screening process, they may choose to end the process at that point for similar reasons.

After individuals have been registered as applicants, there are several additional key decision points. For example, individuals may elect to end the process if they do not want to provide child support information during the intake interview. They may also end the process if they decide that they do not want to participate in the Job Club on a weekly basis, or if they determine that they do not want to contact 10 employers each week throughout the process.

The proportion of applicants who end the process at each of these stages can be measured using data collected through the case record reviews. In our case record reviews, we have observed the number of individuals that completed each of the following steps:

- Complete screening form (Oakland)/attend orientation (Englewood)
- Attend intake interview
- Complete agreement to cooperate with child support enforcement
- Complete and sign Responsibility and Service Plan (RSP)

- Attend weekly Job Club/Focus Group sessions
- Make required employer contacts
- Provide necessary verifications

TANF Application Decisions, Experiences, and Outcomes in Cook County

This section presents findings on the application decisions, experiences, and outcomes of a sample of individuals appearing at the Englewood and Oakland offices of the Illinois Department of Human Services with a potential interest in applying for TANF and other program benefits. The findings are based on the follow-up interviews and case record reviews.

Applicants and Applicant Decisions

The study collected information on individuals with an interest in TANF that appeared at the Englewood and Oakland offices from 11/9/01 – 7/1/02. A random, stratified sample of these individuals was surveyed by telephone from 3 to 9 months after entering the study sample by appearing at the welfare office and signing a contact sheet. Exhibit 11.3 summarizes their TANF application decisions and results.

Exhibit 11.3

TANF Application Decisions and Results: Cook County, IL (n = 200)^a

Certified TANF Applicants (%)	18.9
Uncertified TANF Applicants (%)	53.3
Nonapplicants (%)	27.8

Source: Case Record Review

^a Percentages weighted by stratum size

Exhibit 11.4 displays selected socio-economic and demographic characteristics of the individuals and families with an interest in TANF that appeared at the two Cook County welfare offices. The exhibit presents weighted means and frequencies for the total research sample, as well as statistics for each study stratum.

As Exhibit 11.4 shows, the average family in the study sample has less than 2 children, although more than half of the households include other (non-caretaker) adults, bringing the average household size up to over 4 persons. Almost 90 percent of the families are headed by a single parent, and only a small percentage own their own home.

There are few important differences between the certified and the uncertified groups. One potentially meaningful difference, however, is that the uncertified group is far more likely to possess both a trade license and a high school degree, perhaps indicating higher employability. However, at the time they appeared at the welfare office, uncertified families were no more likely to include an employed member than were certified families.

Exhibit 11.4**Selected Characteristics of Prospective TANF Applicants: Cook County, IL**

Individual, Family, or Household (HH) Characteristic	Total Research Sample^a (n = 200)	Certified for TANF (n = 95)	Uncertified for TANF (n = 105)
Age of prospective applicant (mean years)	28.9	25.2	29.8***
Ethnicity of prospective applicant (%):			
Hispanic	21	19	21
Non-Hispanic:			
White	10	10	10
African-American	60	70	60
Asian, Pacific Islander, or Native American	0	0	0
Multi-ethnic/Other	9	1	10**
Persons in HH (mean)	4.3	4.3	4.2
Children in family (mean)	1.6	1.4	1.7
Families living with other adults in HH (%)	60	55	60
Prospective applicant's marital status (%)			
Married	8	0	10***
Separated	15	12	15
Divorced/Widowed	6	3	7
Never married	71	85	69***
Family's living situation (%)			
Own house	5	0	6**
Rent	38	35	40
Live with others and do not pay rent	33	36	32
Live with others and pay rent	21	26	20
Other (Includes shelter)	2	3	2
Public housing or Section 8 (%)	16	22	15
Educational attainment of prospective applicant (%)			
Less than HS	32	40	30
HS or GED only	39	42	36
Trade school or license	2	3	2
Trade school or license and HS or GED	22	9	26***
College degree	6	3	7
HH with employed member (%)	9	5	10
Family receives child support income (%)	7	4	8
Monthly income available to family (mean) ^b	\$229	\$202	\$240

Source: Follow-up Survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

^a Percentages weighted by stratum size.^b "Income" includes earned and unearned income available to the family to meet monthly expenses.

The follow-up survey included questions about the major reason individuals had for coming to the welfare office to inquire about cash benefits. The results for Cook County are presented in Exhibit 11.5, below. The prevalent major reason for seeking assistance reported by individuals at the Englewood and Oakland offices is a loss of income (46 percent), with unemployment being the most common event behind that loss. Interestingly, uncertified households were far more likely to report job loss as the major reason, potentially indicating a greater attachment to the labor force among that group. Conversely, certified families were twice as likely as uncertified families to list “respondent or child became ill or pregnant” (34 percent) as the major reason for applying for cash assistance.

Exhibit 11.5

Major Reason for Seeking Assistance: Cook County, IL

Major reason (%)	All (n = 200) ^f	Certified (n = 95)	Uncertified (n = 105)
Prospective applicant or other adult in household lost a job	32	20	34**
Household lost income ^a	16	11	17
It became too hard to make ends meet ^b	12	13	12
Household composition changed ^c	7	5	8
Prospective applicant or child became ill or pregnant ^d	20	34	17***
Family moved	7	9	7
Other ^e	6	9	5

Source: Follow-up Survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

^a “Household lost income” includes the following responses: prospective applicant or other adult in household started earning less money from a job; prospective applicant lost some other type of income; financial help from a friend or relative stopped; and, no income/lost income.

^b “It became too hard to make ends meet” includes the following responses: rent, mortgage, or utilities went up; it was getting harder and harder to make ends meet; and, needed to supplement income/needed income to support kids.

^c “Household composition changed” includes the following responses: number of people in household increased; separation from spouse/partner; and, household member died.

^d “Prospective applicant or child became ill or pregnant” includes the following responses: prospective applicant became sick or disabled; child became sick or disabled; and, pregnancy.

^e “Other” includes the following responses: encouraged by office to apply for cash assistance when applying for other benefits; wanted Medicaid or Food Stamp benefits; seeking assistance – related to transportation or unspecified; homeless; in school/student; and, other.

^f Percentages weighted by stratum size

Among the research sample in Cook County, a relatively large proportion (about 28 percent) decided not to apply for cash assistance after appearing at the welfare office for information.⁹ When asked the main reason why they decided not to apply, about 27 percent of these individuals believed that they

⁹ Data are from the follow-up survey; no exhibit.

had incomes too high to qualify. Importantly, another 34 percent who decided not to apply reported that they did not want to engage in the required Job Club and job search activities.

Application Experiences

In an effort to understand the activities required to complete the TANF application in Cook County, as well to observe how far uncertified applicants progressed through the application process, the study used the case record reviews to measure the number of specific requirements for each TANF applicant. Exhibit 11.6 presents findings on the proportion of applicants facing specific behavioral and informational requirements described earlier in this chapter, as well as the proportion of those required who fulfill each requirement. (Note that the data only include cases for which relevant applicant case record data could be found.) The number before the backslash (/) indicates the percentage of applicants required to complete a specific application requirement. The number after the backslash indicates the percentage of those required who completed the specific requirement.

As the exhibit shows, very few of the uncertified sample members actually completed all of the steps in the application process, with only 25 percent of those required to attend Job Club and only 18 percent of those required to make 10 employer contacts weekly actually completing those requirements. This is an expected consequence of an application process that imposes relatively high behavioral demands on applicants.

Exhibit 11.6

TANF Application Requirements—Percentage Required/Percentage Completed: Cook County, IL

Application Requirement (%)	All Applicants ^a (n = 132)	Certified (n = 80)	Uncertified (n = 52)
<i>(Oakland only)</i> Complete screening interview	100%/100%	100%/100%	100%/100%
<i>(Englewood only)</i> Attend orientation	100/100	100/100	100/100
Attend intake interview	99/93	100/100	98/90***
Complete agreement to cooperate with child support enforcement	84/71	91/98	82/78
Complete Responsibility and Service Plan (RSP)	83/71	91/79	80*/68
Attend Job Club sessions	72/43	64/98	76/25***
Provide proof of 10 employer contacts per week	72/42	64/98	76***/18***
Provide all verifications	100/65	100/100	98/48***

Source: Case record review

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

^a Percentages weighted by stratum size; table includes applicants only

Exhibit 11.7 affords a more dynamic illustration of the degree to which prospective and actual applicants complete each step in the process. The exhibit presents the probability that any research sample member appearing at the welfare office will complete a sequenced step in the application process (first line across), as well as the conditional probability that once reaching a given step, an individual will move on to the next steps or outcome in the process. Note that any individual who is exempt from a given step is treated as if they completed the step. The table in Exhibit 11.7 includes fewer steps in the application process than Exhibit 11.6 because 6.7 is restricted to sequenced steps.

Exhibit 11.7

Probability of Advancing Through Steps in the Application Process: Cook County, IL (n = 165)^a

Step in Process	Step in Process					
	Screening/Attend Orientation	Intake interview	Cooperate with Child Support	Attend Job Club	Employer Contacts	Certified for TANF
Appear at office	.61	.55	.49	.37	.35	.18
Screening/ orientation		.91	.81	.60	.58	.30
Intake interview			.89	.67	.64	.33
Cooperate with support				.74	.72	.37
Job club					.97	.49
Employer contacts						.51

Source: Case record review

^a Percentages weighted by stratum size

Reading the table in Exhibit 11.7 from left to right indicates the probability that an individual who has reached the step in the left hand column will complete each of the remaining steps and become certified.¹⁰ For example, the table shows that those that complete the intake interview have a 64 percent chance of making the required employer contacts (or being exempt from that requirement) and a 33 percent chance of becoming certified for TANF. Reading the table down each column indicates the probability that an individual who completes the step in each row will also complete the step in the column. For example, 60 percent of the individuals who complete the program screening or orientation also attend Job Club or are exempt from Job Club. Similarly, 97 percent of the individuals who attend Job Club are credited with making their required employer contacts. The Exhibit indicates a big dropoff at the very first step in the process; that is, 39 percent of the individuals showing up at the Oakland and Englewood offices fail to complete the program screening or orientation. Another important dropoff in the process is Job Club attendance. For example, of those

¹⁰ Note that individuals are considered to have completed a step in the process if they fulfilled the specific step's requirements or if they were exempt from those requirements. Note also that individuals with missing data for any of the application steps are not included in the analysis.

that do complete the screening or orientation, only 60 percent either attend or are exempt from Job Club.

In the follow-up survey, respondents were asked whether or not they thought they were eligible for TANF at the time they appeared at the IDHS offices. Results are presented in Exhibit 11.8. Overall, about three-quarters of the applicants reported that they believed themselves to be eligible for TANF when they went to the office. As witnessed in other case study sites, uncertified applicants were more likely to believe themselves eligible for cash assistance (76 percent versus 51 percent for certified applicants).

Exhibit 11.8
Pre-Application Ideas About Eligibility: Cook County, IL

Applicant's Ideas About Likely Eligibility (%)	Total (n = 200)^a	Certified (n = 95)	Uncertified (n = 105)
Believed to be eligible	72	51	76***
Believed to be ineligible	12	31	9***
Was not sure	16	19	15

Source: Follow-up Survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

^a Percentages weighted by stratum size

The follow-up survey also sought to measure applicants' satisfaction with the application process. In particular, two survey questions focused on applicant opinions about the adequacy of information and office assistance in negotiating the application process. One question asked respondents how well they understood the application process and its requirements and another asked their opinions about the adequacy of office staff assistance in negotiating the application process. Results for Cook County are presented in Exhibit 11.9.

As the exhibit shows, over two-thirds of all respondents reported that they “really understood” the process. Curiously, the uncertified group was more likely than the certified group to report that they understood the process well. A relatively small proportion of survey respondents answered that they “had no idea at all” about the application process, with the uncertified group less likely to report this response.

When asked about how helpful office staff were in assisting them through the application process, over half overall answered that office staff provided all or most of the assistance applicants felt they needed. However, as the exhibit shows, and consistent with findings for other case study sites, the uncertified respondents were less likely to report that staff provided all help needed. Again, note that uncertified applicants are more likely to be dissatisfied with the process, particularly when so many of them felt that they qualified for TANF when they applied (see Exhibit 11.8 above).

Exhibit 11.9**Applicant Opinions About the Application Process and Staff Assistance: Cook County, IL**

Opinions About Application Process and Office Staff	Total (n = 200)^a	Certified (n = 95)	Uncertified (n = 105)
How well did applicant understand application process (%):			
Really understood	71	54	75***
Somewhat unsure	18	24	16
No idea at all	11	22	9***
How much of the help you needed was provided by office staff (%):			
All	31	57	24***
Most	20	25	19
Only some	34	17	38***
None	16	1	19***

Source: Follow-up Survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

^a Percentages weighted by stratum size

Application Outcomes

Observing TANF application outcomes, both at the time of application and at the time of the follow-up interview several months later, may provide insights into whether the application process may be deterring otherwise eligible individuals from applying for, or completing an application for, TANF benefits. As described earlier in this chapter, Cook County has a formal job search requirement that few applicants fulfilled. In this section we observe the status of all sample families at 3 to 9 months following their appearance at the IDHS welfare offices.

Before investigating the likelihood of formal or informal diversion, we present findings about the benefit programs and benefits that TANF applicants in Cook County were able to access. The results regarding benefits are presented in Exhibit 11.10. The exhibit again illustrates the important finding that even though none of the uncertified sample was eligible for TANF benefits, some of them were newly certified for food stamps and Medicaid.

Exhibit 11.10**Application Outcomes: Benefits, Cook County, IL**

Benefit Outcome	Total (n = 200)^a	Certified (n = 95)	Uncertified (n = 105)
Mean monthly TANF benefit	N/A	\$279	N/A
Newly certified for food stamps (%)	24	45	18***
Mean monthly food stamp benefit (for newly certified)	\$254	\$274	\$243
Newly certified for Medicaid (%)	32	58	27***

Source: Case record review

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

^a Statistics weighted by stratum size

Exhibit 11.11 presents findings about why uncertified cases were denied for TANF cash assistance. These results are based on the case record review and represent the “official” administrative reason for denial. As the exhibit shows, only 14 percent of the uncertified applicants were denied assistance due to circumstances or because there was no eligible child in the unit. The other 86 percent of uncertified applicants were denied assistance because they either chose not to, or could not, fulfill some behavioral or informational requirement. Note that this proportion is very high relative to the other case study sites.

Exhibit 11.11**Reasons for Denial of Uncertified Cases: Cook County, IL**

Reason for Denial (%)	Percentage of Uncertified Applicants (n = 69)
Denied for circumstances: too much income	12
Denied for circumstances: too many assets	0
Denied for circumstances: other	0
No eligible child	2
Failure to keep scheduled appointments	45
Failure to provide verifications or required documentation	24
Voluntary withdrawal	12
Other reason	6
Reason not indicated in case record	0

Source: Case record review

The relatively high rate of noncompleters may be evidence of informal diversion or some form of applicant discouragement. On the other hand, many applicants may break off from the process

because they feel they do not need cash assistance and are unwilling to bear the costs of completing the process. When interpreting these results, it is important to note first that caseworkers are not always accurate in selecting a reason for denial, but only that some reason must be selected in order to complete casework on the application. Second, some applicants who failed to complete the application process may have done so because of a belief that they would be found ineligible on other grounds. The follow-up survey included an item designed to measure the extent to which those who failed to complete the application believed that they would be found ineligible for circumstances. Responses from the survey are summarized in Exhibit 11.12.

Exhibit 11.12

Reported Main Reason for Failure to Complete Application: Cook County, IL

Main Reason (%)	Percentage of Uncertified Applicants Who Failed to Complete Application ^a (n = 44)
Too much income	14
Found a job	3
Too many assets	0
No dependent children	0
Missed interview	11
Did not comply with job search requirement	22
Did not provide verifications	14
Did not cooperate with child support enforcement	3
Other	33

Source: Follow-up survey

^a Includes answer to survey question about reasons for being denied *only* for applicants denied assistance due to: failure to keep appointments; failure to provide necessary documentation; voluntary withdrawal; other reason; no reason indicated.

When combined with the results from the case record review presented in Exhibit 11.11, the findings in Exhibit 11.12 indicate that some of the applicants who failed to complete the process did so because they thought they would not be found eligible (“too much income,” “found a job”). On the other hand, others simply listed as their main reason for failing to complete the process the particular behavioral or informational requirement with which they did not comply.

In assessing the degree to which otherwise needy families may have been informally diverted from filing or completing the application, the follow-up survey asked respondents about their current situations and how things have changed since appearing at the Cook County IDHS offices (approximately 3 to 9 months later, depending on the time of appearance at the office and the date of the telephone interview). Results are presented in Exhibit 11.13.

Exhibit 11.13**Family Status at Follow-up and Changes Since Applying for TANF: Cook County, IL**

Current Status or Change	All (n = 200)^a	Certified (n = 95)	Uncertified (n = 105)
Participation in assistance programs (%)			
Currently receives TANF benefits	20	79	10***
Currently receives food stamps	53	61	50
Currently receives Medicaid	73	92	70***
Currently receives WIC	39	61	35***
Child currently receives subsidized school meals (Among households with school-age children)	81 (n = 89)	91 (n = 34)	80 (n = 55)
Employment status and changes			
Currently employed (%)	26	17	28*
Mean hours worked (employed only)	29 hours	30 hours	28 hours
Left employment since applying (%)	2	1	2
Found employment since applying (%)	18	13	19
Employed at both time points (%)	7	4	9
Employed at neither time point (%)	72	82	70*
Change reported in (%):			
Household size	24	37	21**
Marital status	4	1	5
Housing situation	23	39	19***
Current income and changes in income^b			
Current mean monthly income available to family	\$518	\$443	\$533
Change in monthly income since applying	286	239	291
Change in overall financial situation since applying (%)			
Better now	46	66	41***
Worse now	18	6	21***
Same	37	27	38

Source: Follow-up survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

^a Percentages weighted by stratum size.^b "Income" includes all earned and unearned income available to the family to meet monthly expenses.

Overall, uncertified families in Cook County are no better off statistically than certified families at follow up, although they are more likely to be employed. Although uncertified families in Cook County were less likely than certified families to be receiving TANF or Medicaid benefits at follow-up, they were as likely to be receiving food stamps.

Following the general pattern observed in other case study sites, both certified and uncertified families in Cook County had experienced improvements in income since appearing at the welfare office. Again, this pattern is to be expected, since individuals usually apply for welfare at the time of a financial loss or downturn. Curiously, the reported increases in average monthly incomes were the same statistically for certified and uncertified families. Also, following a pattern observed in other sites, uncertified families were less likely than certified families to report that their situation had improved. When family incomes reported at follow-up are compared to incomes reported at the time families first appeared at the welfare office (as opposed to asking respondents directly whether or not they are better off now), certified families were indeed more likely than uncertified families to have experienced an increase in monthly income of more than \$100, as indicated in Exhibit 11.14.

Exhibit 11.14

Changes in Family Financial Status Based on Reported Income at Application and at Follow-up: Cook County, IL

Change in Financial Status (%)	Certified (n = 95)	Uncertified (n =105)
Better off: reported monthly income increased by more than \$100	74	52***
Worse off: reported monthly income decreased by more than \$100	9	11
The same: no change of more than \$100 in monthly income	18	38***

Source: Follow-up survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

In a final analysis designed to indicate the potential for otherwise needy families to be deterred from applying for, or completing the application for TANF, we compare the follow-up monthly incomes of certified clients, non-applicants, and applicants who did not complete the process. Because some of the groups are so small and may vary greatly by family size, we present per capita monthly incomes. We also compare the employment rates for these three groups at the time of the follow-up interview. Results for individuals who responded to these questions in the follow-up survey are shown in Exhibit 11.15.

As the exhibit shows, both non-applicants and applicant noncompleters at follow-up have the same income statistically as do certified applicants. Moreover, those that chose not to complete the process are more likely to be employed at follow up. This is not surprising, given the fact that applicants judged to be more employable were given heavier work-related behavioral requirements and were more likely not to complete those requirements. If the appropriate families are deciding not to apply or complete the application process, one would expect their incomes to be at least the same as the incomes of certified applicants. Thus, the findings for Cook County are *prima facie* evidence that neither formal nor informal diversion is leaving uncertified families worse off than families certified for TANF.

Exhibit 11.15**Reported Family Per Capita Monthly Income at Follow-Up: Cook County, IL**

	Certified Applicants (n = 95)	Applicant Non-Completers (n = 44)	Non-Applicants (n = 36)
Per capita monthly income	\$188	\$167	\$209
Percent employed at follow-up	17%	30%*	17%

Source: Follow-up survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

Concluding Observations

This concluding section addresses the three major research questions for the case studies in the context of the TANF application process in Cook County, Illinois. Those questions include:

How does the TANF intake and application process operate in selected local TANF Program offices and how has it changed since the end of the AFDC Program?

With the implementation of TANF in Illinois, the application process for cash assistance had changed in important ways. Most notable, applicants must complete several employment-related activities in order to complete the application, including participating in an employability assessment, attending weekly Job Club sessions, and conducting a job search throughout the application period. Additionally, participants in some local offices now must participate in mandatory orientation sessions before scheduling an eligibility interview; if they miss the orientation session for that day, they must return the following day to participate, which could cause unforeseen scheduling issues that impede their ability to complete the necessary application steps.

What is the potential for individuals to be formally or informally diverted from filing or completing TANF applications in selected TANF offices?

In Cook County, the potential for diversion may occur either before or after application. For example, individuals appearing at the welfare office may decide not to apply once they become aware of the relatively stringent applicant job search requirements. In fact, a relatively high 28 percent of the individuals with children appearing at the two Cook County welfare offices decided not to apply for TANF benefits.

After applying for TANF, applicants in Cook County may decide not to complete the process due to the relatively stringent behavioral requirements. In fact, based on case records, 88 percent of the uncertified applicant families in the study sample were denied assistance for reasons other than circumstances. This relatively high proportion of noncompleters could be an indication that many applicants are discouraged or otherwise deterred from completing the TANF application process in Cook County.

What is the evidence concerning the possible contribution of changes in the application process to changes in individuals' decisions to apply and to complete the application process?

Among individuals with children appearing at the Englewood and Oakland offices of the Illinois Department of Human Services, 72 percent filed applications for TANF and 28 percent did not; 19 percent of the research sample families were certified for TANF, and another 53 percent applied, but were not certified. Information about the contribution of changes in the application process to changes in decisions to file and complete an application come from three main sources: the informed opinion of caseworkers; applicant reports about their motivation and expectations in the application decision and process; and applicant behavior as reflected in the case record. We consider the evidence from these sources below.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, staff interviewed for the study felt that the introduction of applicant job search and other requirements may be discouraging some families from applying for, or from completing the application for, TANF benefits. For example, caseworkers generally agreed that participation in the Job Club and the related job search requirement of 10 employer contacts per week have had a big impact on individuals' application decisions. Moreover, workers noted that the minimum 30-day wait also affects applicant decisions. These stricter program requirements are believed to deter some individuals from applying or completing the application process.

Combining results from the follow-up survey with results from the case record reviews provides some statistical evidence about the potential for formal and informal diversion. Most notably, a relatively high 28 percent of the research sample decided not to apply, and an also high 88 percent of the uncertified applicants failed to complete the process. Moreover, those that did not complete the process were most likely to drop out without having satisfied work-related behavioral requirements, suggesting that those requirements were experienced as a burden.

When considering the evidence for inappropriate diversion, neither nonapplicants nor noncompleters had incomes less than those of certified families at follow up. Moreover, applicant noncompleters were far more likely to be employed at follow up. Given their relative average financial situation at follow-up, therefore, there is no *prima facie* evidence that, on average, otherwise eligible or needy families are being diverted from filing or completing applications for TANF in Cook County.

Chapter Twelve: The TANF Application Process and Results in Bibb County, Georgia

Overview and Context

Georgia’s TANF Program, implemented in September 1996, expands upon behavioral and employment-related provisions initially established for a welfare waiver demonstration operated prior to TANF implementation. The TANF Program, known as Work First, is administered by the State and promotes participation in employment-related activities. The lifetime limit for cash assistance is 48 months, and once adults meet the lifetime limit, their children are also denied benefits.¹

Exhibit 12.1

Overview of Georgia TANF Policy^a

<i>Time Limit</i>	Lifetime limit of 48 months
<i>Time Limit Exemptions or Extensions</i>	No exemptions; Extensions may be granted for certain situations: domestic violence issues; substance abuse treatment; high local unemployment rate; family has an active child protective services case; recipients is completing work plan; recipient needed in home to care for disabled household member
<i>Family Cap Provision</i>	No additional benefits for any children born after parents have received assistance for at least 10 months
<i>Work Requirements</i>	Participants are required to engage in work activities
<i>Work Activities</i>	Single parents must participate in work activities for 30 hours per week and two-parent families for 35 hours each week
<i>Work Activity Exemptions and Deferrals</i>	Youngest child is less than one year old
<i>Earned Income Disregard</i>	\$120 and 33 1/3 percent of remaining earnings disregarded for first 4 months of earnings; \$120 disregarded for next 8 months; \$90 disregarded for subsequent months

^a Policies prevailing at the time a sample was drawn for the study (10/01–3/02).

Similar to waiver demonstration provisions, able-bodied parents under TANF who quit or refuse to take a full-time job can be sanctioned. Parents with no children younger than one year old are

¹ Young adults who have not obtained their diploma or GED and participants with children under the age of one year may be exempt from the time limit. In addition, victims of domestic violence, individuals in substance abuse treatment, participants in areas of high unemployment, those completing an education or training program, families that have an active case in child protective services, and recipients who have disabilities but who are ineligible for SSI may receive an extension to the time limit.

required to engage in work activities no later than 24 months after first receiving assistance. There is a one-time-only exemption from work activities for single custodial parents with a child younger than one year.

Single parents are required to work 30 hours per week, and two-parent families must engage in employment activities for at least 35 hours per week. Allowable work activities include, for example: unsubsidized employment, work experience, on the job training, vocational education (up to 12 months), job skills training or education directly related to employment, English as a Second Language classes, and mental health services.

The welfare waiver demonstration in place prior to TANF also had a family cap provision that denied additional benefits for any children born after the parent had received cash assistance for more than two years. Under TANF, the State restricted this provision to deny additional benefits for any additional children born after a woman has received benefits for 10 months or more. Georgia does not offer a formal diversion program, and for eligibility purposes, assets are capped at \$1000 per family, in addition to a \$4650 cap on the equity value of an automobile.

TANF Application Process

Georgia was selected for the case studies as an example of a State with an applicant job search requirement. The study site is the Bibb County Department of Human Resources, Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS) in Macon, Georgia. Georgia's TANF Program is administered by the State and is implemented uniformly across local offices.

Overview of the Process

The TANF application process in Bibb County has incorporated specific measures, such as an applicant job search, that emphasize the work-first orientation of the TANF Program. When individuals first enter the office, they receive an application packet from the reception desk staff; they can fill out the application in the office or take it with them and return the packet to the office later in person or by mail. Those who sign the application cover sheet while in the office return it to the reception desk where a screener reviews applications to identify individuals who may be eligible for expedited food stamps. Those that appear to be eligible are directed to a food stamp screener that day. A DFCS job specialist also reviews the applications to screen TANF applicants who appear to be work-ready. The screening is conducted in the office or over the phone. After applicants return the application packet and complete any same-day screenings, they schedule an intake interview, usually for within two weeks.

During the intake interview, applicants review required information with an intake worker and are briefed on major TANF policies and requirements. In addition, they sign a personal responsibility contract that outlines their behavioral requirements in the program. Once their intake interview is complete, applicants who are determined to be work-ready meet with a child care specialist who arranges for child care during their applicant job search, and with a job specialist who explains the requirements involved in conducting the applicant job search, including the provision to complete 12 job leads over the application period. Applicants also meet with Department of Labor employment specialists who explain the mandatory job-search orientation in which all work-ready applicants must participate.

Once applicants have provided all necessary verifications, completed job-search orientation, and conducted at least 12 job leads, the intake worker will process the application.

Reception

Individuals who visit the Bibb County Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS) office enter the lobby through the building's main entrance. The lobby area is a large waiting room with rows of chairs and tables to accommodate individuals waiting for meetings. In the center of the room is the reception desk, which is typically served by two staff members. Individuals approach the reception desk where they are asked the purpose of their visit. Potential applicants who come to DFCS to inquire about or apply for cash assistance are handed an application packet that covers Medicaid, food stamps, and TANF. Individuals can either complete the application packet in the lobby and turn it in at that point, or leave and mail in or drop off the packet once they have completed it.

Most individuals stay in the lobby and complete as much of the application packet as they can. During this time, a customer service representative remains in the lobby to answer any questions, assist individuals in completing forms, and potentially help individuals avoid applying for programs for which they are clearly not eligible. The customer service representative also hands out a customer satisfaction survey to the individuals in the lobby and asks them to provide input on their experience that day. Information collected includes the programs for which applicants are applying, their experience at the office, and anything the agency could have done better that day.

Included in the packet individuals receive from the reception desk is an application cover sheet. Individuals sign this sheet and hand it and the rest of the application packet to the receptionist. At this point, individuals are considered applicants. It is relatively easy to apply for assistance; there are no pre-application requirements. Individuals who take the packet home and mail or drop it off later are considered applicants when the agency receives the signed application sheet. When the application sheet is handed, or mailed in, to the receptionist, it is date stamped; staff have 45 days from the stamped date to process the application.

Screening

When the applications are handed in, they are transferred to a screener who reviews them and earmarks the files of individuals who appear to be eligible for expedited food stamps. The screener refers these individuals to a food stamp screener who conducts a same-day screening for expedited food stamps and schedules a follow-up intake appointment with a TANF worker where appropriate (i.e., applicants who are interested in, and seem eligible for, TANF).

While the screener reviews applications for apparent eligibility for expedited food stamps, a DFCS TANF job specialist simultaneously reviews the applications to check for TANF applicants who appear to be work-ready. The job specialist tries to identify these individuals as quickly as possible to contact them before they leave the office.

The job specialist interviews any job-ready applicants still in the office to identify immediate barriers to complying with program requirements in general, and employment requirements specifically. To facilitate the process, the job specialist tries to interview TANF applicants who have also been screened for expedited food stamps while they are still in the office. Work-ready applicants who have already left the office are contacted and interviewed by telephone.

Whether or not they are screened for expedited food stamps or interviewed about employment barriers, all individuals applying for cash assistance schedule a TANF intake appointment for a later date (usually one to two weeks later).

Intake Interviews

When individuals return for their intake appointment, they meet with their intake worker in the worker's cubicle. Since the cubicles are the workspaces for specific workers, they are typically decorated with the worker's personal belongings, which foster a more intimate environment. The cubicles are semi-private spaces; although the partitions between cubicles are not full walls, conversations between cubicles are muted.

Intake interviews vary in length, depending on the client's circumstances; they can range anywhere from 30 minutes to two hours. During the intake process, the worker reviews the application packet, verifies information on other family and household members, employment history, wage history, income information, education, absent parent information, and the individual's willingness to comply with child support enforcement. Applicants need only agree to comply with child support enforcement in order to process the application. The intake worker makes a referral to the child support enforcement agency, but clients do not have to complete all the necessary child support tasks in order to proceed with the application.

In addition to obtaining information from applicants, workers also provide general information about the program and program regulations. Intake workers explain the work requirements (including the possible exemptions for domestic violence victims, parents with children younger than one, etc.) and additional application requirements, such as mandatory school attendance for school-age children and up-to-date immunization of children. Pregnant applicants are informed that they must be receiving, or scheduled to receive, prenatal care.

After reviewing program requirements, applicants complete a personal responsibility contract. The contract is a computer-generated form; the intake worker checks off the required activities for each applicant, and both the applicant and intake worker sign the form. In addition to work-related requirements, requirements to participate in parenting education, and requirements to ensure school attendance of minors, the contract may also include requirements to attend parent/teacher conferences, attend family planning counseling, or participate in financial management skills training. The contract may also include attending substance abuse or mental health services if relevant. The intake worker and applicant may add additional activities to the form as needed.

After completing the personal responsibility contract, the intake worker explains possible exemptions to the work requirement, including both domestic violence and disability issues. The worker reviews the forms related to these provisions, and applicants sign the forms to indicate that this information was explained to them.

During the interview, the intake worker also determines whether or not applicants should be considered work-ready. Prior to eligibility determination, applicants who are work ready must complete a job search. Workers have discretion in determining work-readiness, and use information obtained through the job specialist's screening when making their decision. Not all individuals are subject to the job-search requirement during the application period. For example, if an applicant is

completing coursework or involved in activities that could reasonably count as work activities, or has several barriers that need to be addressed, the applicant may not be required to participate in the work search activities during the application process.

After the intake worker and applicants have reviewed the application information, noted incomplete verification items, and reviewed the program requirements, applicants are directed to another TANF team member who arranges meetings with other staff. Specifically, this worker arranges for work-ready applicants to meet with child care staff to establish child care arrangements. After completing necessary paperwork related to child care, the worker directs them to the job specialist who explains the application-period job search requirements, schedules a follow-up interview, typically for a week or two later, and directs them to the State Department of Labor (DOL) office to begin their job search activities. Any incomplete verification items can be dropped off or mailed after the intake interview to complete the required application information.

Applicant Job Search

To complete the job search requirement, applicants who are determined to be work-ready must apply for at least 12 jobs. They must provide information to the DFCS job specialist about the employer, the position, and the contact person with whom they spoke. The DFCS job specialist may verify reported information in follow-up phone calls with the listed employer. In addition to the 12 job contacts, applicants must meet with employment specialists at the Department of Labor and attend a mandatory two-day orientation session that reviews job search skills, interview norms, employment resources, and appropriate attire. Over the next week or two, depending on when the follow-up interview is scheduled with the DFCS job specialist, applicants must complete their 12 job contacts. Applicants who fail to complete 12 contacts by the time of their follow-up meeting will be issued a TANF Program Violation Conciliation (TPVC). The TPVC delays the application until the violation is resolved.

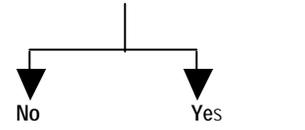
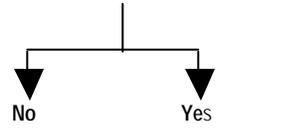
Applicants who find work during the application process and become ineligible for TANF (due to earnings) are eligible to receive a once-a-year \$195 work support payment. Applicants that find work that does not make them ineligible for TANF can receive other work supports, such as transportation assistance, while completing the application process.

Eligibility Determination

Once applicants have completed their applicant job search requirements and have provided any remaining verification, the intake worker processes the case. This typically happens in less than 45 days, which is the maximum length of time allowed between application and eligibility determination.

Exhibit 12.2 below is a representation of the TANF application process in Bibb County, with an emphasis on information exchanged and applicant decision points.

Exhibit 12.2: Model of Application Steps in Bibb County, GA

<p>Information Provided by Client</p>	<p>Reception and Intake</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purpose of visit • Name address, and contact information 	<p>Intake Interview</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demographic information • Family and household composition • Income, assets, resources • Prior welfare experience • Develop and sign personal responsibility contract with eligibility worker 	<p>Pending Application Requirements</p> <p>Complete Information and Verification</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional information and verifications <p>Conduct Job Search</p> <p>Names and signatures of 12 employers contacted during application period^a</p>	
<p>Information Provided by Agency:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Checklist that describes information needed for application verification -Rights and responsibilities of TANF participants • Expedited FS interview, if potentially eligible • Screening of applicants who seem work-ready to identify immediate barriers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pending application requirements • Likely eligibility • Likely benefits • Conditions for receiving benefits • Develop and sign personal responsibility contract with applicant 	<p>Orientation with employment specialist at DOL to review job search skills, interview norms, employment resources, and appropriate attire</p>	
<p>Applicant Decisions:</p>	<p>Whether to sign and file application</p> 	<p>Whether to proceed with application</p> 	<p>Whether to complete pending application requirements within timeframe; whether or not to comply with Job Search requirements</p> 	
<p>Application Results:</p>	<p>Applicant does not begin process</p> <p>Applicants signs and files application form; schedules intake interview</p>	<p>May be referred to other programs or service providers</p> <p>Proceeds with application: given 30 days to complete requirements; application is entered into administrative system</p>	<p>TANF denied due to incomplete application; may be referred to other programs or service providers</p> <p>TANF benefits granted or TANF denied due to circumstantial ineligibility; may be referred to other programs or service providers</p>	

^a Applicants that find jobs that make them ineligible for TANF receive a \$195 work support payment that may be awarded only one time each year. If the job acquired does not make an applicant ineligible for TANF, that individual may receive other work supports, such as transportation assistance, while completing the application process.

Historical Perspective

Some aspects of the TANF application process were already included in the welfare waiver demonstration program that operated in Georgia prior to 1996. For example, work-ready applicants were required to participate in employability assessments and job search or job search training activities during the application process. In addition, they were also required to document that their children were up to date on their immunizations.

These behavioral and employment-related application requirements, in addition to new verification items, may have an impact on applicants' decisions to proceed with the process.² In fact, case managers indicated that if assistance was provided before job-search or employment activities, more people would likely decide to apply or continue with their application. As one worker noted, because there are so many appointments, meetings, and multiple workers involved in each application (intake worker, job specialist, DOL employment specialist, child care specialist, eligibility worker), participants may be overwhelmed and confused by the details of the process. It can be difficult for applicants to understand whom they are seeing for what; they may think that their meeting with one worker fulfilled a number of requirements when in fact they needed to see a number of additional workers to comply fully with application policies.

Applicant Decision Points

Various aspects of the Bibb County TANF application process may affect individuals' decisions to apply and complete an application. There are several key points where this decision is likely to occur. For example, work-ready applicants who are screened by the job specialist prior to their intake interview may decide that they do not want to continue the process after learning about the work requirements. Those who proceed may decide not to continue after the intake interview when general program requirements and applicant job-search activities are more fully explained. Applicants who continue beyond this point may end the process by failing to: meet with the DOL employment specialist, participate in the DOL orientation, or provide 12 employer contacts over the application period. The specific decision points faced by TANF applicants in Bibb County include:

- Attend intake interview
- Sign form 138: Cooperation with Child Support Enforcement
- Sign Personal Responsibility Contract
- Meet with DOL specialist to begin job search activities
- Attend DOL job search orientation
- Collect names and signatures of 12 employers contacted during job search
- Attend follow-up interview with eligibility worker
- Provide all necessary verifications

² New verification information includes a number of questions related to household characteristics, such as collecting social security numbers for all household members, including those not applying for assistance, and documenting any household members who are on parole or have been convicted of a felony.

TANF Application Decisions, Experiences, and Outcomes in Bibb County

This section presents findings on the application decisions, experiences, and outcomes of a sample of individuals appearing at the Bibb County welfare office with a potential interest in applying for TANF and other program benefits. The findings are based on the follow-up interviews with the research sample.³

Applicants and Applicant Decisions

The study collected information on individuals with an interest in TANF that appeared at the Bibb County welfare office from 10/31/2001 – 3/4/2002. A random, stratified sample of these individuals were surveyed by telephone from 3 to 9 months after entering the study sample by appearing at the welfare office and signing a contact sheet. Exhibit 12.3 summarizes their TANF application decisions and results -- 43 percent of those appearing at the office were certified for TANF, 51 percent applied for TANF but were not certified, and 6 percent did not apply for TANF.⁴

Exhibit 12.3

TANF Application Decisions and Results: Bibb County (n = 200)^a

Certified TANF Applicants (%)	43.0
Uncertified for TANF (%)	51.3
Nonapplicants (%)	5.7

Source: Bibb County DFCS automated application files (individuals' certification statuses checked by Bibb County DFCS staff).

^a Percentages weighted by stratum size

Exhibit 12.4 displays selected socio-economic and demographic characteristics of the individuals and families with an interest in TANF that appeared at the Bibb County welfare office. The exhibit presents weighted means and frequencies for the total research sample, as well as statistics for each study stratum.

As Exhibit 12.4 shows, the average family in the Bibb County study sample has about 2 children, although about one-third of the households include other (non-caretaker) adults, bringing the average household size up to about 3 1/2 persons. About three-quarters of the families are headed by a never-married parent, and 23 percent of the households include an employed member. There are few important differences between the certified and the uncertified groups. For example, the uncertified group are more likely to live with other adults in the household.

³ Note that Bibb County withdrew from the study without explanation prior to the case record reviews. This section is based only on follow-up interviews and does not include the range of information and analyses found in the other five case study sites.

⁴ Bibb County DFCS staff were able to categorize our research sample by stratum, even though the site did not complete the case record reviews. Individuals with no application record are considered nonapplicants.

Exhibit 12.4**Selected Characteristics of Prospective TANF Applicants: Bibb County, GA**

Individual, Family, or Household (HH) Characteristic	Total Research Sample^a (n = 200)	Certified for TANF (n = 100)	Uncertified for TANF (n = 100)
Age of prospective applicant (mean years)	28.1	30.2	26.5***
Ethnicity of prospective applicant (%):			
Hispanic	2	3	2
Non-Hispanic:			
White	10	8	11
African-American	85	85	85
Asian, Pacific Islander, or Native American	0	0	0
Multi-ethnic/Other	3	4	2
Persons in HH (mean)	3.7	3.5	3.8
Children in family (mean)	2.0	2.0	1.9
Families living with other adults in HH (%)	35	22	45***
Prospective applicant's marital status (%)			
Married	6	3	8
Separated	20	17	22
Divorced/Widowed	7	12	4**
Never married	67	68	66
Family's living situation (%)			
Own house	4	6	3
Rent	55	68	48**
Live with others and do not pay rent	19	20	18
Live with others and pay rent	17	8	24***
Other (Includes shelter)	5	2	7*
Public housing or Section 8 (%)	28	35	22**
Educational attainment of prospective applicant (%)			
Less than HS	37	44	32*
HS or GED only	42	37	46
Trade school or license	3	2	3
Trade school or license and HS or GED	14	13	14
College degree	5	4	5
HH with employed member (%)	23	22	24
Family receives child support income (%)	22	25	19
Monthly income available to family (mean) ^b	\$324	\$307	\$337

Source: Follow-up Survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

^a Percentages weighted by stratum size.^b "Income" includes earned and unearned income available to the family to meet monthly expenses.

The follow-up survey included questions about the motivation individuals had in coming to the welfare office to ask about, or apply for, cash benefits. Exhibit 12.5 below presents the results for Bibb County. The prevalent major reason for seeking assistance reported by individuals at the Bibb County welfare office is a loss of income or job (46 percent), with job loss being the most common event behind that loss. Another 13 percent reported the major reason as an inability to make ends meet, with some of the underlying cause being an increase in living expenses.

Exhibit 12.5

Major Reason for Seeking Assistance: Bibb County, GA

Major reason (%)	All (n = 200) ^f	Certified (n = 100)	Uncertified (n = 100)
Prospective applicant or other adult in household lost a job	33	32	34
Household lost income ^a	13	12	14
It became too hard to make ends meet ^b	14	9	17*
Household composition changed ^c	13	19	8**
Prospective applicant or child became ill or pregnant ^d	16	20	13
Family moved	5	3	7
Other ^e	6	5	7

Source: Follow-up Survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

^a “Household lost income” includes the following responses: prospective applicant or other adult in household started earning less money from a job; prospective applicant lost some other type of income; financial help from a friend or relative stopped; and, no income/lost income.

^b “It became too hard to make ends meet” includes the following responses: rent, mortgage, or utilities went up; it was getting harder and harder to make ends meet; and, needed to supplement income/needed income to support kids.

^c “Household composition changed” includes the following responses: number of people in household increased; separation from spouse/partner; and, household member died.

^d “Prospective applicant or child became ill or pregnant” includes the following responses: prospective applicant became sick or disabled; child became sick or disabled; and, pregnancy.

^e “Other” includes the following responses: encouraged by office to apply for cash assistance when applying for other benefits; wanted Medicaid or Food Stamp benefits; seeking assistance – related to transportation or unspecified; homeless; in school/student; and, other.

^f Percentages weighted by stratum size.

Among the research sample in Bibb County, about 6 percent decided not to apply for assistance after appearing at the welfare office for information. When asked the main reason why they decided not to apply, close to 40 percent over of these few individuals responded that they had too much income. Exhibit 12.6 presents the results.

Exhibit 12.6**Main Reason for Deciding Not to Apply: Bibb County, GA**

Main Reason (%)	Percentage of Nonapplicants (n = 10)
Too much income	38
Decided not to complete the application process	25
Other	38

Source: Follow-up survey.

Application Experiences

As presented in Exhibit 12.3 above, 43 percent of the individuals appearing at the Bibb County DFCS office during our study period were certified for TANF and the remaining 57 percent were not. Because the Bibb County DFCS withdrew from the study before data could be collected from application case records, our information about application experiences and outcomes is limited to the follow-up survey responses. Nevertheless, the survey responses allow us some insight into application experiences and outcomes, as well as the potential for diversion.

In the follow-up survey, respondents were asked whether or not they thought they were eligible for TANF at the time they appeared at the Bibb County office of the Division of Children's and Family Services. Results are presented in Exhibit 12.7. Overall, almost three-quarters of all respondents reported that they believed themselves to be eligible for TANF when they went to the office. Survey responses follow the pattern observed in the other case study sites: a significantly higher proportion of uncertified than certified applicants believed themselves to be eligible for TANF when they appeared at the welfare office.

Exhibit 12.7**Pre-Application Ideas About Eligibility: Bibb County, GA**

Applicant's Ideas About Likely Eligibility (%)	Total^a (n = 200)	Certified (n = 100)	Uncertified (n = 100)
Believed to be eligible	74	65	81**
Believed to be ineligible	12	16	9
Was not sure	14	19	10*

Source: Follow-up Survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

^a Percentages weighted by stratum size

The follow-up survey sought to measure applicants' satisfaction with the application process. In particular, two survey questions focused on the adequacy of information and office assistance in negotiating the application process. One question asked respondents how well they understood the application process and its requirements and another asked their opinions about the adequacy of office staff assistance in negotiating the application process. Results for Bibb County are presented in Exhibit 12.8.

Exhibit 12.8

Applicant Opinions About the Application Process and Staff Assistance: Bibb County, GA

Opinions About Application Process and Office Staff	Total (n = 200)^a	Certified (n = 100)	Uncertified (n = 100)
How well did applicant understand application process (%):			
Really understood	73	74	72
Somewhat unsure	17	13	20
No idea at all	10	13	8
How much of the help you needed was provided by office staff (%):			
All	49	66	36 ^{***}
Most	19	17	21
Only some	24	14	31 ^{***}
None	8	3	12 ^{***}

Source: Follow-up survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

^a Percentages weighted by stratum size

As the exhibit shows, about three-quarters of the respondents reported that they “really understood” the process and its requirements (73 percent). Importantly, uncertified respondents were as likely as certified respondents to report that they understood the process.

When asked about how helpful office staff were in assisting them through the application process, 68 percent overall answered that office staff provided all or most of the assistance respondents felt they needed. However, as the exhibit shows, the uncertified respondents were far less likely to report that staff provided the needed help. When interpreting this finding, which repeats a pattern found in many of the case studies, note that uncertified applicants are more likely to be dissatisfied with the process, particularly when so many of them felt that they qualified for TANF when they applied (see Exhibit 12.7 above).

Application Outcomes

Observing TANF application outcomes, both at the time of application and at the time of the follow-up interview several months later, may provide insights into whether the application process may be diverting otherwise eligible individuals from applying for, or completing an application for, TANF benefits. Unfortunately, because Bibb County withdrew from the study before the case record reviews, we have only limited information on application outcomes from the follow-up survey: uncertified respondents self-reported reasons why they were not certified for TANF; and families' circumstances 3–9 months following the initial contact with the Bibb County DFCS.

Exhibit 12.9 presents the responses of uncertified individuals when asked why they did not qualify for TANF. As the Exhibit shows, 43 percent of the uncertified respondents felt that they were not certified due to circumstances (too much income, employment, too many assets, or no dependent children). The remaining 57 percent of uncertified respondents answered that they did not complete some part of the application process or listed “other” as the reason for not being certified. Importantly, no respondent answered “failure to complete job search” as the major reason for not being certified for TANF.

Exhibit 12.9

Reported Main Reason for Failure to Become Certified for TANF: Bibb County, GA (n = 90)

Main Reason (%)	Percentage of Uncertified Respondents
Too much income	37
Found a job	2
Too many assets	1
No dependent children	3
Missed interview	6
Did not provide verifications	10
Decided not to complete the process	13
Did not cooperate with child support enforcement	1
Were told to apply for other benefits	0
Did not comply with job search requirement	0
Other	27

Source: Follow-up survey

In assessing the degree to which otherwise needy families may have been informally diverted from filing or completing the application, the follow-up survey asked respondents about their current situations and how things have changed since appearing at the Bibb County Board of Social Services office (approximately 3 to 9 months later, depending on the time of appearance at the office and the date of the telephone interview). Results are presented in Exhibit 12.10.

Exhibit 12.10**Family Status at Follow-up and Changes Since Applying for TANF: Bibb County, GA**

Current Status or Change	All (n = 200)^a	Certified (n = 100)	Uncertified (n = 100)
Participation in assistance programs (%)			
Currently receives TANF benefits	41	76	15***
Currently receives food stamps	66	72	62
Currently receives Medicaid	91	95	88*
Currently receives WIC	52	54	51
Child currently receives subsidized school meals (Among households with school-age children)	86 (n = 100)	85 (n = 55)	86 (n=45)
Employment status and changes			
Currently employed (%)	35	33	36
Mean hours worked (employed only)	29	30	29
Left employment since applying (%)	9	4	13**
Found employment since applying (%)	20	15	24
Employed at both time points (%)	14	18	11
Employed at neither time point (%)	56	63	52
Change reported in (%):			
Household size	21	23	19
Marital status	2	1	2
Housing situation	24	18	28*
Current income and changes in income^b			
Current mean monthly income available to family	\$561	\$518	\$595
Change in monthly income since applying	\$246	\$226	\$261
Change in overall financial situation since applying (%)			
Better now	43	53	35**
Worse now	17	14	20
Same	40	33	45*

Source: Follow-up survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

^a Percentages weighted by stratum size.^b "Income" includes all earned and unearned income available to the family to meet monthly expenses.

Overall, compared to certified families, uncertified families are far less likely to be receiving TANF assistance at follow-up, although they receive food stamp benefits in the same proportion statistically as certified families. Although uncertified families are less likely than certified families to be receiving TANF cash assistance at follow up, they are just as likely to be employed and have monthly incomes from all sources that are no different than incomes for certified families. Although uncertified families are no worse off financially than certified families, they are less likely to report being “better off” at follow up and more likely to report being in the same financial situation at follow up as at the time of application. As is true for the other case study sites, both certified and uncertified families improved their financial situations by the time of the follow-up interview.

By the time of the follow-up interview, both certified and uncertified respondents had experienced improvements in average income since appearing at the Bibb County welfare office. This follows a pattern observed in the other case study sites and is not surprising, given that more than half of all respondents had reported some loss of income as the major reason for appearing at the welfare office in the first place.

As mentioned above, uncertified families were less likely than certified families to report that their situation had improved, even though both groups experienced the same average increases in income. Curiously, however, when family incomes reported at follow-up are compared to incomes reported at the time families first appeared at the welfare office (as opposed to asking respondents directly whether or not they are better off now), a higher proportion of uncertified respondents had experienced an increase in income of more than \$100 per month, as indicated in Exhibit 12.11.

Exhibit 12.11

Changes in Family Financial Status Based on Reported Income at Application and at Follow-up: Bibb County, GA

Change in Financial Status (%)	Certified (n = 85)	Uncertified (n = 91)
Better off: reported monthly income increased by more than \$100	51	67**
Worse off: reported monthly income decreased by more than \$100	8	12
The same: no change of more than \$100 in monthly income	42	21***

Source: Follow-up survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

In a final analysis designed to indicate the potential for otherwise needy families to be diverted from applying for, or completing the application for TANF, we compare the follow-up monthly incomes of certified clients, with uncertified respondents who reported being denied TANF benefits for reasons other than circumstances.⁵ Because some of the groups are so small and may vary greatly by family

⁵ For the other case studies, we used the case record reviews to distinguish between “applicant noncompleters” and other uncertified applicants. For Bibb County we rely entirely on the follow-up survey to try to identify a group equivalent to noncompleters.

size, we present per capita monthly incomes. Results for individuals who responded to this question in the follow-up survey are shown in Exhibit 12.12.

Exhibit 12.12

Reported Family Per Capita Monthly Income at Follow-Up: Bibb County, GA

	Certified Applicants (n = 100)	Applicant Non-Completers (n = 49)	Non-Applicants (n = 10)
Per capita monthly income	\$198	\$173	\$101*
Percent employed at follow-up	33%	29%	30%

Source: Follow-up survey

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

As the Exhibit shows, in Bibb County, applicant non-completers at follow-up have incomes that are statistically equivalent to those of certified applicants. If, on average, the appropriate families are deciding not to apply, or deciding not to complete the TANF application, one would expect their incomes to be the same as, or higher than, the incomes of certified applicants. This is in fact the case in Bibb County and is prima facie evidence that, on average, otherwise needy TANF applicants are not deterred from completing the application process.

On the other hand, however, non-applicants in Bibb reported per capita monthly incomes significantly lower than those of certified applicants. Although this result does not prove that inappropriate informal diversion is happening in Bibb County, it does show that families that decide not to apply for TANF have lower incomes, on average, than certified applicants at follow up.

Concluding Observations

This concluding section addresses the three major research questions for the case studies in the context of the TANF application process in Bibb County, Georgia. As discussed in Chapter One, those questions include:

How does the TANF intake and application process operate in selected local TANF Program offices and how has it changed since the end of the AFDC Program?

In Bibb County, some important application behavioral requirements were already included in the welfare waiver demonstration program that operated in Georgia prior to 1996. For example, since 1996, work-ready applicants were required to participate in employability assessments and job search or job search training activities during the application process and were required to document that their children were up to date on their immunizations. Since TANF, applicants have faced some additional informational requirements, such as collecting social security numbers for all household members, including those not applying for assistance, and documenting any household members who are on parole or have been convicted of a felony.

What is the potential for individuals to be formally or informally diverted from filing or completing TANF applications in selected TANF offices?

In Bibb County, any formal or informal diversion may occur both before and after an individual files an application. Before signing an application, prospective applicants may learn something about both application and program requirements in the reception and screening interviews. Some may decide to drop out of the process at this point, before handing in a signed application cover sheet. Another point at which applicants may be diverted is after the intake interview. At that time, work-ready applicants are required to look for work and to document their job-search efforts. Those that gain employment during this time may be diverted formally due to increased income; others may decide to drop out of the application process.

Because Bibb County withdrew from the study before the case record reviews, we do not have good information on how far uncertified individuals progressed through the application process. We have indirect information on how many of those appearing at the Bibb County DFCS office decided not to file an application for TANF—6 percent.⁶ This is a proportion of nonapplicants roughly the same for other study sites that do not have a mandatory applicant job search requirement, suggesting that the combination of this requirement and others in Bibb County did not necessarily lead to more prospective applicants deciding against applying for TANF benefits.

What is the evidence concerning the possible contribution of changes in the application process to changes in individuals' decisions to apply and to complete the application process?

Among individuals with children appearing at the Bibb County Board of Social Services, 94 percent filed applications for TANF and 6 percent did not; 43 percent of the research sample families were certified for TANF, and 51 percent applied but were not certified. Of the uncertified applicants, about 57 percent did not complete the application process. Information about the contribution of changes in the application process to changes in decisions to file and complete an application comes from two sources in Bibb County: the informed opinion of caseworkers and applicant reports about their motivation and expectations in the application decision and process.

As discussed above, case managers in Bibb County indicated that the job-search requirement in particular may have diverted potential TANF applicants and may have led some applicants not to complete the application process. Also, due to the multiple stages in the process, applicants may become overwhelmed and confused by its details.

Results from the follow-up survey provide some statistical evidence about the potential for diversion in Bibb County. First, only about 6 percent of the individuals in our research sample decided not to file a TANF application; another 22 percent applied but did not complete the TANF application. Although the incomes of applicant non-completers are statistically equivalent to the per capita incomes of certified families at follow-up, the incomes of non-applicants are lower. This latter result is not proof that inappropriate informal diversion is happening in Bibb County. However, the fact that

⁶ Our information about nonapplicants is based on an initial review of the certification status of our study sample that was completed by the Bibb County DFCS before dropping out of the study. In that review, it was found that 6% of the study sample did not have a record of an application on file.

families that decide not to apply for TANF have lower incomes than certified applicants is prima facie evidence that some families that appear to be needy at follow up are not applying for TANF benefits.

Chapter Thirteen:

Cross-Site Summary and Conclusions

The Case Studies of the TANF application process were intended to shed some light on how changes in TANF application policies and procedures may have affected the decisions, experiences, and outcomes of TANF applicants. This final chapter summarizes major findings across the case study sites and addresses the major study research issues.

Cross-Site Summary

The six sites in the Case Studies were chosen as a purposive sample to include local TANF agencies that included a range of TANF application policies. The study sites are not a representative sample of application policies and procedures found nationally, nor are they representative of agencies that use a specific type of application policy or procedure (such as lump sum diversion payments, or applicant job search, for example). Nevertheless, a cross-site comparison of major research issues can help suggest how application experiences and results may be affected by application policies and procedures.

Major Application Policies

The six local TANF offices in the study were initially chosen on the basis of variation in major application policies, specifically, whether the process included an employment related requirement or diversionary assistance. Of course, the application processes varied on other policies and procedures, as well. Exhibit 13.1 summarizes the major TANF application policies and procedures found in the six study sites, including:

- Initial screening interview—an individual meeting with a caseworker or eligibility specialist designed to assess an applicant’s range of needs and likely eligibility, as well to communicate basic application and program information to applicants;
- Program orientation—a group meeting designed to communicate basic application and program information to applicants;
- Intake interview—an individual meeting with a caseworker or eligibility specialist to review a completed application form and to communicate any outstanding documents or information required to process the application;
- Diversionary assistance—the offer of a lump sum payment in lieu of ongoing cash assistance, usually related to an immediate need concerning maintaining or starting employment;
- Employment assistance—any meeting or registration with workers or agencies providing employment assistance;
- Job search—attending a job club and/or engaging in active job search;

- Personal Responsibility Agreement (PRA)—a “contract” between the applicant and the agency, usually outlining mutual obligations; and
- Other policies—among the six study sites, these include finger-imaging, fraud investigations, and post-job search follow-up interviews.

Exhibit 13.1

Major TANF Application Policies

Major Policy	Study Site					
	Mercer Co, NJ	Ramsey Co, MN	San Diego Co, CA	Providence, RI	Cook Co, IL	Bibb Co, GA
Screening	X	X	X	X	X	X
Orientation			X		X	
Intake Interview	X	X	X	X	X	X
Diversionsary Assistance	X ^a	X	X			
PRA			X		X	X
Employment Assistance	X	X			X	X
Job Search					X	X
Other Policies			X ^b	X ^c		X ^d

^a Applicants referred to EEI program receive lump sum payment during job search period

^b Fraud investigation, finger-imaging

^c Fraud investigation for selected applicants

^d Attend post-job search interview with employment specialist

The most common procedures across the six study sites are intake screening and the intake or eligibility interview. Three of the study sites offer some form of lump sum diversionary payment assistance in lieu of ongoing cash assistance. Four of the sites require most applicants to engage in some form of employment counseling, job search training, or registration with an employment security agency; two sites require non-exempt applicants to engage in an active, monitored job search. Two sites conduct anti-fraud investigations for some or all applicants, and include a mandatory home visit as part of the investigation.

Major Reasons for Applying

The follow-up survey asked individuals why they came to the welfare office to inquire about assistance. Exhibit 13.2 summarizes the major responses across the six study sites.

Exhibit 13.2**Major Reasons for Seeking Assistance**

Major Reason (%)	Study Site					
	Mercer Co, NJ	Ramsey Co, MN	San Diego Co, CA	Providence, RI	Cook Co, IL	Bibb Co, GA
Loss of job or income	51	47	46	40	48	46
Financial difficulties	12	14	15	15	12	14
Other reason ^a	37	39	39	45	40	40

Source: Follow-up survey.

^a Other reasons included, for example: respondent or child became ill or pregnant; household composition changed; household moved.

As Exhibit 13.2 shows, individuals were relatively consistent across sites in stating their major reasons for seeking assistance. In each site, the major reason was the loss of a job or other source of income (40 to 51 percent of responses across the study sites). Similar percentages of respondents across the sites answered, “It became too hard to make ends meet” (12 to 15 percent) or gave other reasons (37 to 45 percent).

Application Experiences and Results

Using data from follow-up interviews and case record reviews, the study gathered information about application experiences and results. Among the more important statistics are those summarizing application decisions and results. Exhibit 13.3 summarizes the decisions and outcomes for the study sample of families with children appearing at the six study sites for assistance.

Exhibit 13.3**Application Decisions and Results for Those Seeking Assistance**

Decision or Result (%)	Study Site					
	Mercer Co, NJ	Ramsey Co, MN	San Diego Co, CA	Providence, RI	Cook Co, IL	Bibb Co, GA
No application (nonapplicants)	4	4	8	21	28	6
Formal diversion	6	<1	0	NA	NA	NA
Denied for circumstances	7	18	22	6	19	*
Denied for administrative reasons (non-completers)	28	20	25	12	34	*
Certified for TANF	55	57	46	61	19	51

*Bibb County withdrew from the study before case record reviews could be completed

NA = not applicable

In the welfare offices in which individuals sign and submit an application prior to any screening interview or orientation (Mercer, Ramsey, San Diego, and Bibb Counties), relatively few of those appearing at the welfare office failed to submit a formal application. In Providence and Cook County, however, where prospective applicants received more information about potential eligibility and application requirements prior to filing an application, many more of the sample population decided not to apply. Except in Cook County, TANF certification rates ranged from 46 to 62 percent.¹ In Cook County, where TANF applicants are subject to a 30-day application period and stringent job search requirements, only 19 percent of the sample members in Cook County were certified for TANF benefits and a study-high 34 percent were denied assistance for administrative reasons (including failure to meet behavioral requirements).

Changes in Circumstances

The follow-up survey for the Case Studies included questions about families' circumstances at the time they appeared at the welfare office and at a time approximately 3 to 9 months after appearing at the office. Exhibit 13.4 summarizes certified and uncertified families' TANF status at follow-up and presents changes in employment and monthly income since appearing at the welfare office.

Exhibit 13.4

Families' status and changes at follow-up

Study Site	Outcome Measure				
	Receives TANF (%)	Respondent currently employed (%)	Net change in % employed	Monthly income	Change in monthly income
Mercer Co.					
Certified	64	30	19	\$649	\$316
Uncertified	16***	42*	24	874**	464
Ramsey Co.					
Certified	66	32	13	\$791	\$487
Uncertified	9***	56***	20	1246***	454
San Diego Co.					
Certified	88	33	18	\$837	\$398
Uncertified	18***	40	10	840	219**
Providence					
Certified	83	14	2	\$558	\$226
Uncertified	16***	43***	18	878***	328
Cook Co.					
Certified	79	17	12	\$443	239
Uncertified	10***	28*	17	533	291
Bibb Co.					
Certified	76	33	11	\$518	\$226
Uncertified	15***	36	11	595	261

* Different from certified at 90% confidence level

** Different from certified at 95% confidence level

*** Different from certified at 99% confidence level

¹ Note that in this study the certification rate is the proportion of families with an interest in cash assistance appearing at an office found eligible for TANF. Usually, the certification rate, or "approval rate," is the proportion of applicants found eligible.

Exhibit 13.4 illustrates well the fact that individuals seek public assistance during times of relative financial hardship—each sample stratum in each study site was more likely to be employed and had higher incomes at 3 to 9 months after appearing at the welfare office. Moreover, the monthly incomes of uncertified families at follow-up were the same as, or greater than, the monthly incomes of certified families in all of the sites, and the heads of uncertified families were more likely to be employed in 4 of the 6 study sites, and as likely to be employed in the remaining two sites.

Formal Diversion

Three of the study sites implemented formal cash diversion policies under TANF. Exhibit 13.5 presents the proportion of study sample members accepting formal diversion payments. As can clearly be seen, formal cash diversion payments were not used or chosen by many people in the specific sites chosen for the study.

Exhibit 13.5

Formal diversion

	Study Site		
	Mercer Co, NJ	Ramsey Co, MN	San Diego Co, CA
Percentage of sample choosing cash diversionary payments (%)	5.8	0.4	0.0

Evidence of Informal Diversion

Each of the case studies used information from three sources to assess the potential for informal diversion: the informed opinion of caseworkers; applicant reports about their motivation and expectations in the application decision and process; and applicant behavior as reflected in the case record. Exhibit 13.6 summarizes some of the evidence from these sources.

Exhibit 13.6**Evidence of Informal Diversion**

Measure of Diversion (%)	Study Site					
	Mercer Co, NJ	Ramsey Co, MN	San Diego Co, CA	Providence, RI	Cook Co, IL	Bibb Co, GA
Worker opinion ^a	N	N	Y	N	Y	Y
Nonapplicants + non-completers (%) ^b	32	24	33	33	62	35 ^e
Uncertified and did not understand process (%) ^c	41	26	37	36	25	28
Uncertified and did not receive enough assistance (%) ^d	47	44	46	29	57	43

^a Y = workers felt that application process diverted some individuals from applying or completing application
N = workers did not feel that process diverted some individuals from applying or completing application

^b Percentage of sample members that did not file an application or did not complete an application

^c Percentage of respondents in uncertified sample stratum not reporting that they “really understood” the application process

^d Percentage of respondents in uncertified sample stratum not reporting that they received all or most of the help they needed in completing application

^e Bibb County withdrew from the study before case record reviews could be completed; information on the proportion of non-completers is based follow-up survey responses, and is not as reliable as this statistic for the other five study sites.

As Exhibit 13.6 illustrates, except for Cook County (and possibly Bibb County), the proportion of families with children appearing at a welfare office for assistance that decide not to apply or not to complete an application is relatively constant across the study sites—from 24 to 33 percent. Interestingly, this measure for Cook County, which has implemented an applicant job search requirement under welfare reform, is a relatively high 62 percent. Another potential sign of informal diversion is the degree to which uncertified individuals (or non-applicants) felt they did not understand the application process or did not receive the help they needed to complete the process. Depending on the study site, from about one-quarter to one-half of the uncertified individuals reported some confusion with the process and some dissatisfaction with the amount of assistance they received.

As discussed in Chapter One, “informal diversion” may or may not be appropriate. If diversion serves to identify early in the process families that are clearly ineligible or to help individuals quickly find employment, diversion can save low-income families and public agencies time and effort. On the other hand, however, if informal diversion serves to withhold benefits from otherwise needy (and likely eligible) families, it should be avoided.

To test for the potential for inappropriate diversion, the study compared the post-application incomes and employment of non-applicants and applicant non-completers with the income and employment of certified families. The principle behind this comparison is that, on average, families that decide not to

apply, or not to complete an application, should not be left worse off than certified families.² Exhibit 13.7 summarizes the result across the six study sites.

On the basis of the findings in Exhibit 13.7, most nonapplicants and applicant non-completers are faring at least as well as certified families at the time of the follow-up interview. For those groups in those study sites, therefore, there is no prima facie evidence that, on average, otherwise needy families are being diverted from TANF benefits. On the other hand, however, non-completers in San Diego County, and nonapplicants in Bibb County, have mean monthly incomes below those of certified families. Although this finding does not prove that inappropriate diversion is happening, it demonstrates that in those sites, some groups of families that did not apply or did not finish the application process were not faring as well as certified families at follow up. This points to the possibility that otherwise needy families may be informally diverted from benefits during the application process.

Exhibit 13.7

Evidence of Inappropriate Diversion: Comparison of Nonapplicants and Applicant Non-completers to Certified Families at Follow-up

Outcome Measure	Study Site					
	Mercer Co, NJ	Ramsey Co, MN	San Diego Co, CA	Providence, RI	Cook Co, IL	Bibb Co, GA
Monthly Income						
Nonapplicants	(=)	(+)	(=)	(+)	(=)	(-)
Noncompleters	(=)	(+)	(-)	(=)	(=)	(=)
Employment Rate						
Nonapplicants	(=)	(+)	(=)	(+)	(+)	(=)
Noncompleters	(+)	(+)	(=)	(+)	(=)	(=)

(+) = statistically greater than mean for certified families at 90 percent confidence level or better

(-) = statistically less than mean for certified families at 90 percent confidence level or better

(=) = statistically equivalent to mean for certified families at 90 percent confidence level or better

Conclusions

The Case Studies were designed to address several of the major research questions of the Study of the TANF Application Process. This section reviews each question and summarizes the findings reported in earlier chapters.

How does the TANF intake and application process operate in selected local TANF Program offices and how has it changed since the end of the AFDC Program?

The study sites were chosen purposively on the basis of their policy choices regarding diversionary assistance and applicant job search. Diversionary assistance is a lump sum payment in lieu of ongoing cash assistance. Three of the study sites (Ramsey Co., Mercer Co., and San Diego Co.), offered

² This principle is akin to the 19th century English concept of “lesser eligibility” under which no family on assistance should be left better off than the poorest working family.

diversionary assistance and two sites (Cook Co. and Bibb Co.) included a required job search for most applicants.³ With the exception of the sites that have implemented applicant job search, the major requirement for the TANF application process is the same as for AFDC: providing appropriate information to determine eligibility and benefit levels, as well as documentary proof of that information.

The sites varied somewhat on the number of visits to the welfare office applicants have to make to complete the process, although in all sites a minimum of two visits is usually required. Moreover, some sites have introduced additional measures to minimize the potential for fraud, such as a requirement for finger-imaging (e.g., San Diego Co.), and potential fraud investigations for some or all applicants (e.g., Providence and San Diego Co.).

The applicant job search requirements and diversionary benefits in some of the study sites have been implemented since welfare reform (in some instances prior to PRWORA). In most of the other study sites without those features, however, the TANF application process has changed little since AFDC, although policies for certified clients have changed.

What is the potential for individuals to be formally diverted or informally deterred from filing or completing TANF applications in selected TANF offices?

Three of the study sites included formal diversion policies, although those policies were rarely chosen by (Ramsey Co., San Diego Co.), or imposed upon (Mercer Co.), applicants. The study found far more potential for informal diversion. For example, each of the study sites normally requires at least two visits to the office to complete the application process, providing the opportunity for applicants to drop out of the process. Moreover, most sites also include a screening interview or a program orientation. These activities, often completed on the day of the initial visit to the office, allow for a preliminary exchange of information that may convince applicants that they are likely to be found ineligible, that they do not want to comply with one or more application requirements, or that the expected benefits from going through the process are too small to be worth the trouble.

The sites that have implemented applicant job search requirements have introduced an activity that has increased the burden in time and cost for applicants. In fact, in the site with the most stringent job search requirement (Cook County), 62 percent of the study sample either decided not to apply for TANF or did not complete the application process—a proportion nearly twice that of most other sites.

What is the evidence concerning the possible contribution of changes in the application process to changes in individuals' decisions to apply and to complete the application process?

The Case Studies relied on three sources of information about ways in which the TANF application process may affect decisions to apply, or to complete an application for, TANF benefits: the informed opinion of caseworkers; applicant reports about their motivation and expectations in the application decision and process; and applicant behavior as reflected in the case record. In three of the study sites, including the two with applicant job search requirements, workers believed that some of the application policies and procedures introduced under welfare reform might be deterring some individuals from applying or from completing an application.

³ Mercer County's diversionary assistance program (EEI) is a lump sum payment intended to support a job search, but there is no broadly-applied applicant job search requirement.

Other evidence for potential informal diversion comes from individuals' behavior and opinions. For example, in five of the sites from one-quarter to one-third of the research sample decided either not to apply for TANF or not to complete the TANF application process; in the site with the most stringent applicant job search that combined proportion was over 60 percent. Moreover, important proportions of uncertified individuals⁴ reported either that they did not understand some aspects of the process or did not get the help they needed to complete the process.

The evidence adduced above for informal diversion does not by itself indicate that diversion was inappropriate or harmful. To uncover the potential for inappropriate diversion, the study compared the post-application incomes and employment rates of nonapplicants and applicant non-completers with those of certified families. The potential for inappropriate diversion arises when otherwise needy families appear to be deterred from applying for, or completing applications for, TANF benefits. In fact, the study found that, on average, only 2 of 12 sample groups of nonapplicants or applicant noncompleters were faring worse than certified families at the time of a follow-up interview at 3 to 9 months after appearing at the welfare office. These findings do not necessarily prove that inappropriate diversion is not occurring. However, the findings provide prima facie evidence that in most sites those families that may have been informally diverted are no worse off, and are often better off, than certified families at the time of a follow-up interview several months after first appearing at the welfare office to apply for cash assistance.

⁴ The study distinguishes among three types of uncertified individuals: nonapplicants, applicants who did not complete the application process ("applicant non-completers"), and applicants denied TANF for circumstances (e.g., too much income, no dependent child, and other circumstances).

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